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Nick Whiffles's Pet; OR, IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH.

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HAZEL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOUR YEARS AFTERWARD.

Four years have passed, and the short, beautiful summer of the North-west has again folded mountain, prairie and stream in its loving embrace. The sky is clear and bright with sunshine, the streams, except among the mountains, are free from ice, and the face of nature is very different from what would be expected so soon after such severe weather.

In front of a rough, grotesque cabin, which has already been described to my reader, sits Nick Whiffles cleaning his rifle. Although four years have passed since we last saw him, there is scarcely any perceptible difference in his appearance. In the grizzled beard which covers the greater part of his face, there may be seen a few straggling hairs, but that is all. The eye is just as bright, the step as firm and powerful, and the smile as genial as ever. He is dressed in the same hunter costume, and so far as he is concerned, it seems that a few days only have passed since his participation in the rescue of Hugh Bandman and the Phantom.

A short distance away, the rotund, sleek-looking Shagbark is browsing the rich, succulent grass, and at the side of his master, with his nose between his legs, dozes his dog, Calamity.

Four years have made their marks in the career of Calamity, although he still bears up well under them. He is somewhat unwieldy in his movements, and has become quite fond of basking in the warm sunlight, and of sleeping by the blazing fire during the terrible cold of winter. Perhaps he is a little more surly to strangers, too, and is disposed to resent undue familiarity upon the part of any one. But he loves Nick as well, and his dangerously-sharp teeth are ready to be used in his service at any time.

The older hunter seems to be in a reverie this afternoon, and his motions in cleaning his weapon are almost mechanical, his thoughts being far away on different matters altogether.

Suddenly he stops polishing the already-gleaming rifle-barrel that is stretched across his knees, and with one hand pressing down and grasping it, and shoving his coon-skin cap back from his forehead with the other, he exclaims:

"I swoo to gracious! if it

ain't four years ago this very summer sin' Ned left me, with his father, and with Hugh and his wife. They left the little gal behind them, and that same gal has grown into one of the prettiest creatures that a man ever set eyes on."

At this point one of his broad smiles illuminated his face, and he added in a confidential tone to himself: "I wonder, now, ef I was a mind, ef I couldn't raise a condemned diffikility there. No one dare say I ain't handsome, and then I've heerd tell of folks gettin' married as old as my father would be ef he were living to-day."

He smiled a few moments in the enjoyment of his own fancy, and then his face became sober again.

"No; the day has gone by fur Nick Whiffles to think of sich things. He is married to the woods, and peraries, and mountains, but Miona, if Ned hasn't forgot his promise, it'll pay him to come out here to see her. It's about a month sin' I was through the village, and she looked purty 'nough to fly off like an angel. She hasn't forgot Ned, neither, and axed me about him; but I couldn't tell her nothin'. All I know is that Ned and his old man went to England,

as they called it, in the same vessel that carried Hugh and the Phantom. There's been a trapper down here every spring to ax about the gal, that I s'pose Hugh and his wife sent, and there's no danger of their forgetting her—Hello!"

At this juncture, Calamity threw up his head, pricked up his ears, and uttered a growl—an indication that some stranger was at hand. Almost instinctively Nick grasped his rifle, and looked inquiringly in the direction indicated by the dog.

"What is it, pup?" he demanded, in an undertone; "any call for powder and ball?"

The reply speedily came. The crackling of the undergrowth was heard, and the next moment a young man in the jaunty costume of an English sportsman stepped into the clearing. He wore the velvet cap, coat, and vest, the high-topped boots, the leather covering the knees, the powder-flask at the side, and the richly-mounted rifle of the professional hunter of civilization, and there was an ease and self-possession in his manner acquired only by long and genuine practice in hunting game.

The countenance of the young man was frank and prepossessing, with his dark, hazel eyes, the ruddy, rose-tinted cheeks and their soft "mutton-chop" whiskers. He was of a muscular mold, and would have pulled a good stroke with the famed Oxford crew of his own country.

He paused a moment in front of the hunter, and then, with beaming face, walked rapidly toward him, holding out his hand.

"How do you do, my old friend? God bless you, Nick Whiffles, have you forgotten Ned Hazel?"

Nick mechanically took the proffered hand, rose slowly to his feet, and with open mouth stared at the young man in a dazed sort of way, as though he did not understand what it all meant.

"What's the matter, Nick? have I changed so much that you don't know me? Why, I knew *you* the minute I placed my eyes on *you*," continued the sportsman, laughing in a way that showed his handsome white teeth, while he shook the hand of the trapper with such violence that his whole body partook of the vibration.

"Thunderation!" finally gasped Nick; "can it be possible? Are you my own Ned? Why, you war a boy when you left me, and I've been thinking of you as the same boy ever since."

"I was over fifteen then; now I am nearly twenty. Is there anything wonderful in that?"

"Wonderful?—I never see'd anything like it. What do you weigh?"

"Only one hundred and seventy-five."

"Thirty pounds more than I do; let me take a nearer look at you," continued Nick, scrutinizing his face very closely. "There's them hazel eyes, sartin, just as bright and purty as they was when they looked at me from the bottom of the canoe, sixteen or seventeen years ago. Lift your cap that I may see your forehead a little better."

The young man removed his



THE STRAINED AND LISTENING EAR OF THE TRAPPER HEARD THE FAINT CRY, JUST AS CALAMITY'S WHINE TOLD THAT HE HAD ALSO CAUGHT THE SAME SOUND.

cap entirely, and stood in a smiling but meek attitude before the sorely puzzled trapper.

"Your hair is as soft and silky as it was then, your eyebrows are the same, and there's the scar where the grizzly bear nipped you with his nail, and your cheeks are as red as ever, but them condemned whiskers, they spoil you."

"I fancied they were rather becoming," said the young man, with a rueful face, as he caressed them with his hand; "however, Nick, do you still doubt my identity?"

"No; I b'lieve you're the giniwine animile, and we'll shake hands on't. God be thanked, Ned, I'm glad to see you. Set down, set down; Calamity don't know yer, although he's eying you purty sharp."

"How are you, pup?" said Ned, turning toward the dog and patting his head.

Perhaps, away down in the lowermost depths of the memory of the animal was a dim, and flickering shadow of the handsome individual before him, and a faint gleam of intelligence lit up the eye of Calamity as he gazed at him. At any rate he knew he was the friend of his master. That was sufficient, and seating himself upon his haunches, he gazed contentedly upon the two men.

The two friends sat down on the log, side by side, and Ned said:

"Before going any further, Nick, let me ask you when you saw Miona last?"

"A short month ago, and she was as well and purty as ever; but, how is it you're here, Ned? You was to wait five years, and that won't be till another winter has come and gone."

"You're right, Nick; but, do you suppose I could content myself away from her any longer? I did my best; I have been to school and studied hard; indeed I am by no means through with my schooling yet. I finally told the folks that I couldn't stand it any longer, and they gave their consent; so I took the first ship for Fort Churchill; Bandman and his wife came with me, so as to be here to meet us. I reached the fort about a month ago, and found a small party just getting ready to start for Oregon. As I was pretty well known at head-quarters, I was given charge of the half-dozen men, and began working our way down to this point. We intend to visit the village, if it is safe, and barter with them; but, of course, I couldn't pass anywhere near you without stopping to see you, and then, before I go near the place, I want to learn how the land lies, and to engage you to accompany us."

"Where are the men?"

"A number of miles up the river; I came them on ahead, and made an appointment to meet them tomorrow morning near the bend; so I am going to spend the afternoon and night with you."

"I only wish it was going to be a year," remarked Nick, with a tremulous voice. "I've been counting the months I would have to wait fur you, and I never dreamed you war goin' to cut 'em short by a whole year."

"But you ain't sorry, I am sure," exclaimed Ned, in his hearty way, as he struck his hand upon the knee of the smiling trapper. "I have been in correspondence with Miona ever since I left. It takes a long time for a letter to go from here to London and back again, and we didn't average many a year; but Mrs. Bandman had an arrangement by which we knew when to send, and when to expect letters."

"I know they get letters at the fort from England, but how did they send 'em down here?"

"There was a hunter—Tim Nevins—who was employed to pass between the village and the fort, and he did his duty well. So, you see, I am here, and before we talk of old times, my best and truest of friends, tell me all you know about the darling of my heart. You have just told me she is well, and handsome, of course, but is she treated with consideration and respect among the Indians?"

"The same as she allers was."

"She doesn't expect me, because I wanted to surprise her; but when I was on my voyage across the Atlantic, a strange fear came over me. It occurred to me that such a beautiful and good woman as Miona must be admired among the Indians, and it is no more than likely that she has several dusky lovers, who are looking hopefully forward to the time when she is to become a wife."

Nick Whiffles turned and looked sharply in the face of his young friend, and then answered, in a startling voice:

"*You're right!*"

"Explain!" commanded Ned, turning pale.

"I've a s'pcion of one man. Thar may be plenty of others—and I make no doubt thar is—that would give thar heads for her, but thar's only one that she need be afraid of, and that's Red Bear, the son of the old chief Woo-wol-na."

"What about him?" demanded the lover, with a painful eagerness.

"Mind, the gal hasn't told me anything, but I s'pcion, fact is, I'm sartin, that they've fixed that she shall be his squaw."

"In the face of this solemn agreement—"

"Mighty!" interrupted the trapper, "what's all the trainin' I give you amount to? Haven't you learned a red-skin's natur' yet?"

"If they had given any reason to believe that they intended to keep their part of the agreement, none would be more conscientious in keeping mine; but, as they intend to perpetrate a great wrong, I shall now do my utmost to get her out of their hands, with as little delay as possible."

"You're right," said Nick, "and here's my hand upon it. We'll go down to the village together, and look round to see how things look, and arter that we'll fix the way we're goin' to act."

"There's no danger of my identity being suspected."

"Not much," laughed the trapper. "I don't b'lieve the gal herself can be made to b'lieve it's you till after you've spent a week in swearin' to it, and then, arter all, she'll think it's your big brother."

"In that case, we will go together to the village. Oh! if I could but see her!" he exclaimed, springing up in his excitement. "One look, one glance at her—I would walk a thousand miles to get it."

"P'raps you needn't go quite so far as that, though they're apt to keep her powerful shady when white folks ar' about."

They sat in delightful converse, until the evening was drawing to a close, when Nick looked up.

"It's gettin' dark, and we'll go in, take supper, and start bright and airy in the mornin'."

"Have you any traps set?"

"Yas; but they don't need lookin' arter, and we'll tend to 'em in the mornin'."

The two walked into the hermit-like residence, where they ate their old-fashioned supper together, and then followed a long talk, in which each gave the other the particulars of his life for the previous four years.

Finally they lay down and slept.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE WAS HE?

LONG before the sun was up, Nick Whiffles and Ned Mackintosh were astir. The old hunter had a number of traps, from which, during the winter, he managed to secure a most valuable lot of peltries. His experience and intimate knowledge of the country taught him where to search for the haunts of the otter and beaver, and he always had a nice little income from his furs, caught during the winter.

It was with strange emotions that the young man made his rounds of the traps. Everything looked familiar—the appearance of the trees and vegetation, the smell of the woods, the clear, stinging air—all revived powerfully the memories, that had almost faded during the rush of events, during the four years that had been spent in another hemisphere and among scenes the very antipodes of these.

But here he had spent his childhood, and never could these scenes and incidents be forgotten.

In each of the half-dozen traps visited, was found a good plump beaver, every one of which was killed and dressed by Ned's own hand, and they reached the cabin again and made their breakfast upon the delicate tails of the creatures.

They then took a half-hour's ramble in the woods, the young man bringing down the antelope with a skill which elicited the admiration of the veteran trapper, who declared it was almost as neatly done as he could have done it himself.

"I have kept up my practice at home," replied Ned. "There our hunting is somewhat different from this, but both require good marksmanship, and I can never lose the taste I acquired for it under you; but my men will be at the bend, and we have little time to lose."

Calling out a jocular farewell to Shagbark, who was lazily munching the grass, and accompanied by Calamity, who seemed to be unusually frisky this morning, Nick plunged into the woods, and led the way toward the river along which he had spent so many years of his life.

As they reached the bank, a long Indian canoe was found there, and the six men, upon being called, speedily made their appearance. They were hardy, brown-looking fellows all acquainted with Nick and glad to meet him.

Courageous and fully armed, they had greater fear of the North-west men than they had of any Indians, and they made particular inquiries of Whiffles as to whether they were liable to encounter them on the river or not.

The trapper had seen and heard nothing of them during the spring, but he could not guarantee either their appearance or non-appearance at any time. So he advised the Hudson Bay men to be on the look-out.

Suspecting that they were in advance of the Northwest traders, the little party pulled with a will downstream. They were in too dangerous territory to fancy it much, and having no wish to have another collision with the members of the great rival company, of course they used every effort to make their stay as short as possible.

"Do you see that?" asked one of the trappers, as they stepped into the canoe, pointing at the same tie to a rigid scar across the upper part of his nose. "Wal, one of them blamed Nor'-westers done it, and as long as we've got such a small company, my advice is to steer cl'ar of 'em."

They kept a keen "look-out," as they journeyed along, but were greatly relieved at the end of a couple of days, when they rounded to in front of the village, without meeting any other white men.

It was arranged that Nick Whiffles should act his old part of "go-between," or interpreter, Ned Mackintosh landing with him. The first person with whom they exchanged a word was Red Bear, who came to the water's edge with his father to meet them.

As may be supposed, the young lover scrutinized his savage rival with anything but amiable feelings.

"Confound him!" he muttered, as he glanced sideways at him, "it would do me good to bury three or four balls from my revolver in your skull. The idea of your presuming to the notice of my Miona!"

With a heart fluttering with hope, he looked here, there and everywhere in hope of catching a glimpse of the girl herself, but not the first indication of her was discovered, and, at a sign from Nick, he withdrew, leaving him to carry on the interview alone.

While the bartering and exchange were going on

the old trapper stood apart talking earnestly with Woo-wol-na and Red Bear.

Mackintosh feigned to take no notice of them, but, as may be supposed, his interest was no less than theirs; and, when his friend came back to him, and they put out into the stream, he could scarcely restrain his impatience.

Nick speedily explained.

"I swow to gracious if I could hardly keep my hands off of both of them old rips!" he exclaimed, with considerable feeling.

"What did they say?"

"You know they've never objected to my seeing the gal, when I axed fur her. The fust thing I done was to ax 'em to let her come down and have a word or two with me; (you see I wanted you to get a sight of her,) and what do you think they said?"

"I am sure I cannot tell."

"That she was gittin' ready to git married to the scalawag of a Red Bear, and she hadn't time. It was mighty hard work when I heard that to keep from making a condemned diffikility with 'em, but I held in, and just for the fun of the thing, axed 'em what they war goin' to do when the friends of the gal come arter her next spring. They said, that wouldn't make no difference. She was the pledged wife of Red Bear, and of they made any muss, she'd be put in the *Death Lodge*, and there'd be the end of it."

Ned gnashed his teeth.

"Why didn't I shoot him at once! If I had known it, I couldn't have prevented myself—"

"Hold on!" said Nick, with a fatherly wave of his hand. "I got mad enough fur both of us. We've learned how the land lays, and now we'll go to work."

"Nick," said his young friend, after a few minutes' thought, "I feel that I can't go back without seeing Miona. As she is undoubtedly in the village, what is to prevent my getting out of the boat and going back and watching my opportunity?"

As may be supposed, the trapper opposed this, but the young fellow pleaded, and the old hunter, out of his great love, consented against his judgment, that the attempt should be made.

So, when they had ascended the river about a half-mile, and were beyond all sight of the village, he was put ashore.

It was about the middle of the afternoon, and the agreement was that Ned was to be on the spot by dark. He intended to approach as nigh the village as was safe, and there to wait in the hope of seeing her. If it was possible, he wished to communicate with her, apprising her of his presence, and what he and Nick proposed doing for her.

If he should fail to see her at all, he gave his promise to be at the spot by nightfall.

The traders had orders to continue on up the river and make all haste into British territory, where there was no danger of being molested by the dreaded Nor'-westers.

Nick Whiffles, left alone with Calamity, sat down on the ground to await the return of his young friend with the stoical patience of an Indian himself.

Not until the night was considerably advanced did he feel any misgiving. Still he waited and listened, until at last, the gray light of morning filled the woods, but still there was no Ned Mackintosh.

"What kin be the diffikility?" he muttered, as he and Calamity took the trail and followed it; "ef they've harmed my Ned, I'll skulp every Blackfoot this side the Rocky Mountains. Hyer's the trail of the lad as plain as day; take it, Calamity, and we'll folter it to the end. Ef he's in the wigwam of Woo-wol-na or Red Bear, he's got to come out, and ef he's in that infernal *Death Lodge*, I'll burn it down, by mighty."

The gray eyes of the trapper lit up with a furious gleam, and there was no mistaking his deadly earnestness, as with long strides he struck into the woods, following close to the dog, who, with nose to the ground, was on the trail of the young hunter, and keeping it with the certainty of a Siberian bloodhound.

But ah! a sudden "diffikility" presented itself; for scarce a hundred yards were passed, when he came to a small creek, the existence of which he had forgotten. A short examination showed that Ned had entered a canoe, which was evidently lying there, and supposing he had crossed, Nick adjusted his rifle and swam over; but to his surprise there were no indications of the canoe having landed, either above or below the place.

He spent the entire day in searching the banks of the creek, following both sides up and down for fully a mile, and using Calamity to assist him. The result was nothing.

The second morning he visited the village, and day after day was spent in searching for his "dear Ned," dearer now than ever, and yet he obtained not the slightest clew.

He was completely baffled, foiled, and finally in despair he turned his back upon the Blackfoot village, and sought his lonely home in the wilderness, feeling as though it would be a relief to throw off the burden of life, and take his departure to his last resting-place.

But he could not content himself in idleness and he soon renewed the vain hunt.

CHAPTER III.

THE "CONDEMNED DIFFIKILITY" OF ALL.

"Of all the condemned diffikilities that I've ever been in, this yer's the worst," muttered Nick Whiffles. "I thought it was purty bad when me and Calamity got separated that night in the storm, when my canoe upset, and Calamity landed in the wrong

place, and my gun sunk to the bottom, and the snow was falling so fast that I couldn't see the length of my nose ahead of me; wal, thar war a diffikilt, and no mistake; but this yer's wust nor that."

He heaved a great sigh, that showed how deep his feelings were, and looked plaintively out on the river flowing by. He was quite a distance from home, and was standing on the bank of the stream, upon which he had hunted and trapped so often.

He had now spent the greater part of a week in hunting for his young friend Ned, who had so strangely disappeared while searching for Miona, and yet had discovered no clew at all. He had visited the Blackfoot village, and with a daring that attested his affection, as well as bravery, had actually put some searching questions to Red Bear.

"And he answered them as innercent as a lamb, too," muttered the trapper, "but, for all that, I know the old copper-skin could tell me all about him, ef he war a mind to open them lips of his. I don't know whether Ned has gone under, or whether he still floats his sticks, but somehow or other I think he's walkin' the airth, and I think I shall soon see him ag'in, though it ain't sartain," he added, as if to reprove himself for this sudden spasm of hope.

"It's put me and you to our stumps, Calamity," he added, looking down with his old quizzical smile, at his dog sitting at his feet. "We've tramped the woods night and day, but it didn't do no good. Ned left in a canoe, and me and you, pup, hain't l'arned to track a man over the water, yet, though we've tried it often 'nough."

He stood a few minutes longer, looking out on the surface of the river, with that absent, meditative manner, which showed how much his heart was enlisted in the work he had undertaken.

Then, with another great sigh, he continued:

"Poor Ned! I wonder if he knows how much old Nick Whiffles loves him! and then to think that he come all the way across the great ocean, a year ahead of his time, to see the little gal, that I s'pose he's dreamed about night and day ever since, and now who kin tell where the feller is—"

The old trapper suddenly recoiled a step, while his bronzed face flushed up as though some wonderful vision had passed before him. But it was only a thought that had come to him suddenly, and that had so aroused him from his mournful reverie.

"Why didn't I think of it bef're? That's what I order done in the first place. I must see Miona myself, and tell her everything that's happened; she knows more about the ways of Red Bear and the Indians round here than I do."

"I'll set her to work; I've see'd that gal often 'nough to l'arn that that's somethin' in her more than common woman. Then she loves that young Ned, just as much as he loves her, and she'll move heaven and earth till she l'arns what's become of the chap that's grown into as purty a man as he war a boy. I must see her, and I'll start at once."

Throwing his rifle over his shoulder, he moved off at a rapid stride through the wood toward the point where he had left his canoe, but had taken scarcely a dozen steps when he abruptly paused.

"What is it, pup? Something on the river, eh? Red or white-skin? Man or four-legged critter?—"

Nick started again, for at that moment a canoe came in sight, scarcely a hundred feet distant, and seated in the center who should be seen but the very person whom above all others (excepting one) he desired to meet.

"Wal, ef thar war ever a special Providence, that isn't anything else. I was just going down to the village after Miona, dying to see her, when here she comes."

The sharp-eyed girl was not liable to miss seeing so prominent an object as a man standing on the bank, and recognizing her old friend Nick Whiffles, she nodded pleasantly to him, and turned her canoe toward the land.

Leaping out as lightly as a fawn, she placed her little hand in his large, rough palm, and said she was always happy to see him.

"And it does an old chap like me a powerful heap of good to look on such a purty, sweet face as yours. What ar' you thinkin' 'bout, Miona?"

"I was just thinkin' while paddling along in my canoe, that four years have passed since father, mother and Ned left me here. Only one year more and he is to come for me."

And the face of the girl glowed with heartfelt happiness—happiness that was born of great, pure, eternal love for him who had won it when she was but a mere girl.

There was no doubt there—no fear that in the far-away scenes of his home, where he had been years growing and developing into a splendid young man, where he encountered "civilized" beauties every day—no thought that his right loyal heart would ever falter in its devotion to its first love. Miona was happy.

"It is now summer," she continued, in the same glad voice; "soon will come the snow and ice, and we shall be locked up in our lodges, until the warm sun breaks up our rivers, drives away the snow, and the flowers come into the woods again—and then he is to come. Oh, Nick, can you wonder that I feel happy? But what is the matter, my dear friend? You look sad and troubled over something."

"So I am, so I am," he answered, with another sigh, as he drew the back of his hand in a suspicious manner across his eyes.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked, in a sympathetic voice, as she tenderly laid her hand upon his arm.

"No, no, it's all 'bout you; it ain't me alone, but you, too, are in the condemnedest diffikilt of your life. What's the use? Mighty! I might as well make a calf of myself and out with it."

And then, summoning all his self-command, the

trapper told the whole story to the girl—how Ned Mackintosh, impelled by his devotion to her, had not been willing to wait until the expiration of the probationary five years, but was already in America, had come all the way from Fort Churchill, with a party of traders, and had visited the Blackfoot village, feeling that he must have one look at her, and then perhaps he could wait until the coming spring; how he had talked with Red Bear, face to face, believing that the chief could not recognize him, since he had changed so much that even Nick himself had no suspicion of his identity, when he presented himself before him; and then, determined that he would see his beloved, he had left the traders, and gone off—and since then nothing had been seen or heard of him.

"It's all my fault, too," he added, in a self-reproachful voice. "I had no business to let him go, but then I loved him so much that I couldn't refuse him anything he axed."

For a few moments, the emotions of Miona were too painful to permit her to speak; after awhile she gained control of herself and said:

"You are not to blame for anything that has happened; your services to all of us can never be overestimated. I saw you both, when you were at the village a few days ago, and little did I dream that that young man was Ned."

"You see'd us then?" asked Nick, flashing up with a new interest. "I didn't know that."

"I saw you both; why didn't you ask for me?"

"Ask for you? That's about all that I did do, and wasn't I told that you was so busy gittin' ready to be married to Red Bear that you hadn't time to see other folks?"

"Were you told that?" asked Miona, with a pale, terrified look.

"Yes; and more too. They told me that you had agreed to marry Red Bear—though I knew that war a lie—and they didn't intend to give you up, and that if anybody tried to take you, you would be put in the Death Lodge."

"Now I understand it all," replied the girl, speaking as though some new light had just broken in upon her mind.

"Hain't that varmint bothered you any?"

"I could not help seeing, for a year past, that Red Bear was quite an admirer, but he has always shown me a certain deference, and never pressed matters."

"He ain't ready yet—when the time comes, he will do it fast enough. How is it you're lowed to run loose?"

"I have always consented to keep out of sight when we had visitors, and only when they supposed none was near have I been permitted to take my canoe, or hunt in the woods, but I always have a companion, and even now I expect soon to be joined by the sister of Red Bear, who is to meet me a little way up the river."

"But, Nick," said Miona, rousing herself with an Amazonian dignity, "we must find Ned, if he is living!"

She pronounced the last clause in a tremulous voice, and looked appealingly to the trapper, who hastened to say:

"I think he's above-ground—and now, Miona, can you meet me here to-night?"

"I will, if you wish it."

"Have you l'arned, or heerd nothin' that woke your spicions?"

"Not a syllable."

"Then go back to the village, and don't show you s'pect anything, but do all you kin to find out what has 'come of that Ned. You're smart, and I b'lieve you kin do it. Meet me here, just as the moon is risin', and tell me what you've l'arned."

The girl promised that it should be done. At that moment she saw no way by which she could secure a half-hour's absence from the village, but she was resolved that it should be done, come what might.

The knowledge that she had gained of the proposed treachery of Woo-wol-na and Red Bear, showed her her danger, and the necessity of her doing her utmost to get out of their power, and the knowledge that, under Providence, the fate of her lover depended upon her skill and daring, made a veritable Joan of Arc for her a time.

So they separated, and the weary hours of the day were spent by Nick Whiffles in the same vain search that had lured him on for so long a time.

For several hours before the time he was waiting at the rendezvous, and just as the moon began shedding its pale light over the wood and stream, he heard the dip of her paddle, and a moment after her stealthy footsteps, as she came like a shadow to his side.

"Sh!" she whispered, "I have a companion—Red Bear's sister."

"Have you l'arned anything?"

"Yes; I think I can tell you the fate of Edward!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIL.

WHEN Miona announced to Nick Whiffles that she had learned the fate of Ned Mackintosh, the old trapper could scarcely repress his excitement.

"Alive or dead?" he asked, eagerly.

"Alive," was the reply; "wait here a few minutes; I must get rid of her, and then I will return."

And she was gone as suddenly as she came.

Nick heard the sound of her paddle as it grew fainter and fainter, until it died out in the distance, and then he sat down like one exhausted.

"That 'ere is a woman," said he, as something like his old spirits came back to him; "hain't she follered up that trail better nor an old hunter like me kin do it? Calamity, when that female gal comes back ag'in, I want you to take yer hat and make your best bow to her."

And indulging in his quirps and quiddities with the sagacious canine, he whiled away the half-hour until Miona herself reappeared.

"I can now spend several hours with you, without being missed," she hastened to say. "I retired to my lodge, and have arranged my bed so as to make it appear that I am sleeping there. I don't think the deception will be discovered until the sister of Red Bear comes to retire with me, and that won't be for several hours, as there's to be a sort of a feast tonight that will keep them awake until midnight, and from which I easily excused myself on the plea of indisposition. I am very anxious to get back in time to prevent any discovery of my absence, as it may embarrass our future actions."

"But Ned—what about him?" was the impatient question of Nick.

"I did what you told me to do," she answered. "The whole day has been devoted to trying to learn something about him. I have not asked a single question of any one, but have watched and listened. A couple of hours ago I saw Woo-wol-na and Red Bear talking, and I managed to pass near enough to hear the old chief utter three words; they were:

"Grizzly Bear Cave!"

"And there I believe Edward has been placed, and left to die a death of starvation."

"You're right!" exclaimed Nick Whiffles, enthusiastically. "I never thought of that. That's what he is, and I'll start for him at once."

"Do you know where it is?"

"About five miles down the river, close to the bank on the other side."

"That is the place; I did not suppose you knew where it was. I came with the intention of guiding you to it."

Then followed a long consultation. Miona was anxious to accompany the trapper, and assist in the rescue of her lover. Nay, she would not listen to his denial, until he succeeded in convincing her that it would most probably defeat her very object.

The long confinement of Ned Mackintosh in Grizzly Bear Cave, with no food, had probably reduced him to the weakness of a child, so that he would be unable to render the assistance that would be so much needed in their flight; and indeed, he would only be worse than a burden to them—insuring the capture and ruin of the entire party.

"Ef he's thar, with the help of Heaven I'll get him out. I'll take him home and make a well man of him, and then, when everything's ready, we'll move ag'in, and I s'wo to gracious, if we don't make the condemnedest diffikilt that Red Bear or Woo-wol-na ever heard tell on."

"You go back to your lodge, and don't let 'em see that you've l'arned anything, and be on the look-out for us in a week from now."

"I came with the intention of helping you save him," she said, in a mournful voice; "I hoped that when we got him out of the cave, we would all leave the country at once, and end this torturing suspense; but it would be wicked in me to act contrary to your advice. I have brought some food with me; give this to him, and tell him how anxious I was to share his danger and his suffering. Poor Ned! what has he endured on my account!"

And the girl sobbed like one whose heart was breaking. Nick waited until the tempest of her grief had passed, and then he urged her to return to the village, and to act as he had instructed her to do.

Reluctantly she took his hand again, and bade him farewell—renewing her protestations of love to her own cherished one, and making Nick promise to come as soon as possible to her own rescue.

She had scarcely taken her departure, when the trapper and his dog were in his canoe paddling down-stream toward Grizzly Bear Cave.

He was compelled in his course to pass directly by the village, but he hugged the other shore close in doing so, and ran little if any risk.

In the current again, and he bent his iron limbs with such a will that the canoe seemed fairly to fly over the water.

"Grizzly Bear Cave!" he repeated; "don't I know where it is? Didn't I tumble into it once, when I war a-huntin' with a trapper, and ef he hadn't catched the limbs and saved himself, wouldn't I have starved to death thar? It's a horrible place, and a man who gits in thar is purty sure to be in the last diffikilt of his life, ef he hain't got somebody to help him out. Poor Ned! I s'pose he's give up long ago, and made up his mind that Nick Whiffles is the biggest fool in the trappin'-grounds, as he is, sure 'nough, not to 'spect his bein' thar. Come, old canoe, you must travel faster than this."

Mile after mile was passed, and the night was quite advanced when he ran the little boat ashore and he and Calamity stepped out.

"Yer it is," he muttered, as he made his way up a jagged mass of rocks, his heart trembling with hope and fear. "I wonder if he's down thar, and ef he is, whether he hain't gone under. Hello! here's the very hole I tumbled inter that night and come so near breakin' my neck, and gettin' inter my last condemned diffikilt."

Creeping forward he leaned over and looked down into the dark, silent chasm, and then he called in a voice that sounded strange and hollow:

"Hulloa, Ned!"

He waited, but there was no response.

"Hulloa, Ned Hazel!"

Again he turned his ear and waited several moments, but no sound reached him except that faint, moaning silence, such as is heard when one listens to a sea-shell.

"Hulloa, Ned, are you hungry?"

When five minutes more had passed, Nick Whiffles rose to his feet and muttered:

"I'm afraid poor Ned has had his last diffikilt!"

CHAPTER V.

GRIZZLY BEAR CAVERN.

FULL of eager hope, Ned Mackintosh left his friend, Nick Whiffles, and started toward the Blackfoot village, with the purpose of gaining one glimpse of Miona—she for whom he was willing to brave and to do so much.

Reaching the small creek to which reference has been made, he was not a little surprised to find an Indian canoe, lying against the bank at his feet.

"Now, if there is no owner near, I call that extremely fortunate," he muttered, as he furtively glanced about. "I can cross to the opposite side, and then, perhaps, when the red fellow comes back, he will think he forgot and left it there."

He gave one vigorous shove, and sprung in. The canoe moved about half-way across the creek, and began drifting downward, when Ned picked up a paddle; but, as he dipped it into the water, it occurred to him that the safer way would be for him to descend the creek to the river, and then steal along shore.

By this means he would avoid leaving the telltale trail that has proved fatal to so many similar enterprises. So keeping the boat in the center of the stream, he gently used the paddle, and glided easily down the current, reaching the river itself at the end of a few minutes.

Still hopeful and confident, he paddled along, keeping close to the shore, and was within a very short distance of the village, when he saw the prow of a large canoe, coming around a short bend in the river.

As quick as a flash the young man ran his boat under the shore, where the overhanging limbs looked dense enough to cover him, and with some apprehension awaited the coming and passing of this new danger.

He was not kept long in waiting. The measured dip of paddles came nearer and nearer, and when nearly opposite, the bushes in front of him were cleaved in twain by the prow of the other boat, and he was captured!

It was done so quickly that the astounded young man had no thought of resistance ere he was seized and his arms bound.

"What is the meaning of this!" he demanded, indignantly. "I came with the traders. *This is dangerous to you!*"

The last words were uttered in the Blackfoot tongue.

In doing so, Ned entirely forgot himself, and committed a blunder which he saw on the instant was fatal.

In the canoe were both Woo-wol-na and Red Bear, and when they heard their own tongue used so well and forcibly, a dim suspicion of theirs at once became conviction.

The appearance of the young man with Nick Whiffles, during the early part of the day, caused both to suspect that he was the boy-lover of four years before, who had promised to return for Miona.

Still, the changes in his personal appearance were so great, that they could not dare to feel certain, until they despaired him lurking in the vicinity of the village, and heard him use the tongue he had learned from his old friend Nick Whiffles. Then, as has been shown, all doubt became certainty, and there was no hesitation as to what disposal should be made of him.

They could easily kill him, but there were some slight apprehensions that vengeance might be visited upon them if they did this, as the sharp eyes of Nick Whiffles would be apt to detect and report the crime, while he could be quietly carried to the rocks and dropped into Grizzly Bear Cavern and left to die of starvation, without the slightest trace remaining to tell the tale of his fate.

Understanding that he had sealed his own doom, Mackintosh attempted no entreaty, resistance or threats. The baleful scowl and exultant looks of Red Bear, and his equally heartless father, told too plainly that all would be thrown away there.

Sad, unspeakably sad as it was, he had brought his own fate upon him.

Speeding swiftly down the river, they speedily passed the village, and then on for several miles, until they reached the hard, bare rocks, where the heaviest foot could leave not the slightest print to betray its passage.

Here the body of the despairing, wretched Ned Mackintosh was lifted from the canoe and carried across the rocks to the opening of the cavern.

This was irregular in shape and some four or five feet in diameter. Holding the captive for a moment, one of the Indians cut the thongs that bound his arms, so that his limbs were entirely free, and then let go!

Down through the dark, cold air of the cavern he whizzed, certain that his last moment was at hand, and that the next instant he would be a crushed, a shapeless mass at the bottom.

But, instead of striking the flinty rock, he splashed into chilling water, sinking down fully a dozen feet, when he came in contact with the cold stone, and sprang upward again.

As he rose to the surface, he looked about him, but could see nothing at all. Everything was blank darkness, and only when he raised his eyes could he detect the round, jagged hole above him, through which the dim, fading light of day entered. Striking out, however, he took but a few strokes, when he came against an obstruction, climbing upon which he found himself upon a broad, flat rock, clear of the water.

"Saved from one death to die another a hundred-fold more dreadful!" murmured the poor sufferer, as he seated himself upon the rock, and tried to think calmly upon the situation.

The night so rapidly deepened that when he looked upward, it was impossible to discern the entrance to the cavern, while the gloom around him was absolutely impenetrable.

He did not dare to move from where he was sitting, lest he should stumble into some pitfall worse than the one from which he had just extricated himself, and so he prepared to spend the night where he was.

"There is no possibility of my escaping from here," he reflected, "or they would not have cast me in. Nothing but the intervention of Heaven, through Nick Whiffles, can save me."

"Will he suspect what has become of me? I promised to rejoin him by dusk, and it is past that time now. He will wait and search all the night and all to-morrow, but there is no trail by which to guide him here. He is keen-witted, and so is Calamity, but what clew can they gain to my whereabouts?"

"Oh! if Miona could only know, how quick would she fly to my rescue? She would find some means of getting me out of this living tomb. I long for daylight that I may know precisely my situation."

He found that his revolver was still left in his pocket, with his powder-flask and ammunition, but his captors had kept his rifle.

He sat for a long time upon the damp, hard rock, but finally dropped off into slumber, which lasted through the entire night; for, when he awoke, the first thing that attracted his notice was daylight shining through the round hole over his head, and which let in enough illumination to disclose the entire interior of his prison home—Grizzly Bear Cavern.

It was over fifty feet in diameter, very irregular in shape, tapering up to a height nearly half as great where the opening was to be seen. Every side inclining inwardly toward this, one glance only was needed to show the prisoner that it was utterly inaccessible, that no gymnast in the world could leave the cavern, without assistance from the outer world.

He had some hope during the night, that some stream ran through it, and by means of a long dive he might succeed in escaping, but even this frail hope was dissipated, when he saw that it was not a stream, but a deep pool, which had gradually filled from the oozings through the sides of the rocks, and that when it reached a certain point, the overflow escaped by filtering through the ground and earth.

No; Ned Mackintosh was indeed in his tomb, unless some friend would come and save him.

The more he thought, the more improbable did it seem that Nick Whiffles would suspect his fate, and slight indeed was the foundation upon which he could build any hope.

So excited and feverish and wretched did he feel for the first twenty-four hours that he scarcely thought of food. Back and forth he walked, pausing now and then to quench his thirst, and to keep his brain from going wild with the thoughts that were racking him.

Late at night, he lay down, exhausted and wearied, and slept a feverish, unrefreshing slumber.

He awoke several times, and his sufferings would have excited the sympathy of any one.

When morning came again, he was sensible of the pangs of hunger, and the thought occurred to him that possibly there might be some fish in the pool that were obtainable.

So he spent a couple of hours in groping around with his hand, and sure enough he caught one weighing nearly a pound. This he carefully preserved, eating morsel by morsel, until nothing but the bones were left, in the meanwhile hunting for more.

But search and work to his utmost, he could find no more, and he was subjected to the gnawing pangs of hunger again. Then came the pacing to and fro, like the caged lion, then exhaustion, fever and delirium, all alone in the gloomy cavern.

Night and day were all the same, and he lost the consciousness of the passage of time. Whether he had been there three days or a week he could not tell.

Why need he seek to know? Death was coming slowly, but surely. Why rack his brain? It only added keenness to his anguish. Forgetfulness, oblivion, stupor, were mercies now.

Then came dreams so vivid that he scarcely knew whether he was awake or asleep.

And lying thus, he seemed to see his old friend Nick Whiffles, and Calamity, and Miona, floating through the air overhead. They seemed to be looking mournfully at him, and beckoning him to come. He sought to move, but could not.

"*Haloo, Ned!*"

He opened his mouth, but the words came not.

"*Haloo, Ned Hazel!*"

He made an effort to rouse himself, but the stupor could not be shaken off.

"*Haloo, Ned, are you hungry?*"

Again he struggled with the energy and desperation of a dying man. Rising to the sitting position, he gasped, moaned, and then feebly wailed:

"*Yes, I am here, Nick!*"

The strained and listening ear of the trapper heard the faint cry, just as Calamity's whine told that he had also caught the same sound.

"Hold on, Ned! keep up a good heart!" came back the cheery voice of Nick. "I'll soon have you out of there!"

Then the trapper rose to his feet muttering:

"It's 'bout twenty-five feet down to that water. When I tumbled in, the other feller had to cut a young tree, and pass it down there, and I climbed up, and throwed it over the edge of the rock yonder, where it's layin' yet, if nobody ain't took it away."

A few minutes' search discovered the sapling, with its knotty protuberances, and this was carefully

lowered down the opening, Nick calling out to his young friend to stand from under.

"Thar ain't much need of that," he added to himself, "it's all water right thar, and so deep that the stick has got to be rested ag'in' the side of the pool."

When it was at last adjusted, the top scarcely protruded above the surface, so little was there spare in the length of the sapling.

"Now, Ned, come right up that like a monkey."

"Oh, Nick! I am too weak to stand!"

"By mighty!" muttered the ho-ror-stricken Whiffles, "is it as bad as that? Then I'll go down to yer, and ef I can't get you out, I'll stay thar and die with yer. Calamity, you keep watch above, fur I don't b'lieve you can climb a tree."

Fastening his rifle to his back, the trapper carefully descended, foot by foot, until he stood on the rocky floor below.

"Nick, my darling boy, whar are yer?" he asked, reaching his hands out in the gloom.

"Here, Nick, here!" and a staggering form pitched into his arms.

"God bless you, my boy!" murmured the trapper, the tears running from his eyes; "don't try to help yourself; I'll take care of yer!"

It was a work of incredible difficulty to ascend the knotted tree, with him in his arms; not on account of his weight, but the task of climbing with only one arm free.

The tree bent fearfully under the additional weight and tough and muscular as was the trapper, he was utterly exhausted, when at last he reached the top, and lay down panting and almost breathless, beside the still weaker Ned Mackintosh.

But Nick speedily rallied, and lifting his "boy" again in his arms carried him to his canoe, and then he sped homeward, driving his boat with the fury of a madman through the water.

Ned rallied and ate some of the food brought to him, and the trapper never paused through the night. The young man finally dropped into a pleasant slumber, from which he did not awake until the succeeding day was far advanced, when he roused up, ate more food, and then listened to the story of his true and tried friend.

When he heard all, and especially the part that Miona herself had borne in his rescue, his emotions can scarcely be described.

"The noble, brave girl!" he murmured; "she shall be rescued! Only wait till I recover and am myself again!"

"Yas; the first thing is for you to be yourself ag'in, and you ain't goin' to do that in a hurry."

But Ned did do it in a hurry. Young, vigorous, and healthy, he speedily regained his usual condition under the careful nursing of Nick Whiffles, who furnished him with an extra rifle, and took him on several hunts, before he pronounced him fit to engage in the recapture of his beloved Miona.

Just one week from the time of his emergence from Grizzly Bear Cavern, Nick Whiffles declared that the time had come for the rescue of the affianced of Ned Mackintosh.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE ELK RIVER AGAIN.

On the next morning a canoe was gliding down the Elk river, in which were seated Nick Whiffles and Ned Mackintosh, and the dog Calamity.

The former was in the bow, and with his rifle resting lazily between his knees, was watching his young friend, who was using the paddle, as he had been wielding it for the last two hours.

"How do I make out?" he asked, with his usual pleasant smile. "Am I doing as well as I did four years ago?"

"I sorter fancied you didn't at first," was the reply, "but you larned it too well in them days to forget it soon. I don't see as your stroke can be much improved. How's your wind?"

"All right; I haven't forgotten to take plenty of exercise, although it has been of quite a different character from this."

"Hush!" Mackintosh ceased paddling, and the two men heard distinctly the trappers' song! It sounded quite a distance away, coming through an intervening stretch of woods, but it was unmistakable.

"I declare," exclaimed Ned, laying his paddle across the gunwale and leaning back in the canoe. "That calls up the past more vividly than anything else. Don't speak for a few minutes, Nick."

With which he closed his eyes, and listened, and as he did so, he felt that he was indeed a boy again. He was once more roaming through the great wilderness of the North-west, chasing the antelope and buffalo, setting his trap on the mountain streams, and sighing and dreaming over the beautiful daughter of the Phantom Princess.

At last he opened his eyes, and said, with a smile:

"The dream was pleasant, but it has past. Where are the trappers, above or below us?"

"Alove."

"They are coming down-stream?"

"Yes; they are gainin' on us purty fast."

"Are you sure they're not Hudson Bay men?"

"They're Nor'-westers—I can tell any of 'em by their songs. Do you want 'em to pass us?"

"Yes; I would like to see them, and we will let them go through their business with the Blackfeet, before we appear on the stage."

Toying idly with his paddle, the trappers soon came in view. They were in three large canoes, averaging a dozen men in each, advancing with a regular, steady sweep, keeping time with the words of a stirring song.

"How natural that looks!" exclaimed Ned, as he watched them with a kindling eye; "I am living over my boyhood again."

The trappers rapidly overhauled the smaller canoe, and as both parties were near the center of the stream, they came very near each other.

"As sure as I live," exclaimed Ned, in an undertone, "there is that man who headed the party four years ago. I think his name is Belgrave."

"It's the same chap; he's the one, too, that headed the attack on the Hudson Bay men, three years ago. He came near gettin' killed at the time, and he's powerful savage on your father. Don't let him know who you are."

"Hello!" called out the individual referred to, as he signaled to his men to stop rowing. "Is that you, Nick Whiffles?"

"I think it is," was the reply.

"Where bound?"

"Down the river."

"Who've you got with you?"

"A young friend of mine, a sort of visitor in these parts."

"He ain't one of them Hudson Bay men, is he?"

"Does he look like it?"

"Not much; have any of 'em been down in these parts since we cleaned 'em out so beautiful?"

"I haven't seen or heard of any. I don't think they will disturb you any more."

"I'd like to see 'em try it—that's all—I'd give a cargo of peltries if I could lay hands on that Mackintosh that played me such a trick four years ago. I heard he left the country after that."

"So he did."

"It's lucky for him—I've heard tell, too, that he had a son that used to be in these parts. Do you know any thing 'bout it, Nick?"

"His son was in the boat that time you and him came so near gettin' afoul of each other."

"Wal, Nick, I'll give you a hundred dollars if you'll show me where I can lay hands on that Mackintosh or his son. I ain't particular which one it is, for you make the one squeal through t'other just as well as if it was himself."

Nick waved him good-by, and the two parties separated.

"Perhaps, if I hadn't grown so fast, that savage fellow might have recognized me, and then there's no telling what might have happened," remarked Ned, with a laugh.

"He feels sore over the trick we played him that time. We'll take it easy on the river, so as to be sure of not gettin' in that way. And now, let me swing the paddle awhile," added Nick, reaching forward; "I feel the need of some exercise like that."

Ned consented, and while the hunter plied the implement, he lay back in the boat, meditating upon his errand, and upon its probabilities of success.

"I can not—can not live without her," he mused, reflecting upon this charming beauty of the woods. "There has never closed a night around me that I haven't prayed for the safe coming of this day, and now that it is here, I am full of doubt and misgiving about the success of that which I have always looked upon as certain. I can only ask Heaven to be kind to us, as it has alwa's been in the past."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLOW.

WHEN night had fairly settled upon the river, Nick Whiffles turned the prow of his canoe toward shore, and they landed on the edge of the dense forest, walked inland a rod or so, until they entered a deep gorge.

"I've camped here before," said the old hunter, "and we'll kindle the fire ag'in."

"Are there no Blackfeet near us?"

"There may be in the woods, or on the river; but they can't see this fire unless one of 'em stubs his toe and pitches over into it. I find it rather cool to-night, and there ain't much of a moon, so I'll do as I've done before."

In such a place it was easy to find fuel to last the entire night. When this was done, Mackintosh produced a match-safe, and had the fire started in a twinkling. Then they gathered about the crackling blaze, and while they ate their antelope-meat, discussed the all-important errand upon which they had come.

When the night had considerably advanced, they stretched out, with their blankets about them, by the camp-fire. Calamity, who had spent most of the evening in sleeping at the feet of his master, now roused up, as if conscious of the responsibility that had suddenly been put upon his shoulders, and assumed an appearance of vigilance very comforting to his human companions.

"He can be trusted as well as ever?" inquired Ned.

"I think he's a little better, if any thing," replied Nick, with no little pride. "He's more suspicious than ever, and he ain't apt to wait so long afore he puts his teeth into the legs of the animals that come around him. I'd trust Calamity sooner than any human I ever seed."

Calamity was not forgetful of his duty, and he maintained faithful watch through the entire night. Nick Whiffles, as usual, slept soundly and sweetly until daylight, but the young man was so preoccupied with his love for and fear about Miona, that his rest proved very unrefreshing. He awoke several times through the night, and sat up and looked about him. On each occasion he saw Calamity whisking about, in and out among the trees, as lively and watchful as though his years were not rather heavy upon him.

Once the lover arose and walked to the edge of the river, standing there a few minutes, and looking out upon the unruffled surface. The night was quite dark, so that the faint moon gave only a dim view of the gently-flowing river; but not a breath

of air was stirring, and the deep, hollow silence of the solitude soothed his troubled spirit, and going back to the camp, he lay down and almost instantly fell asleep.

On this day they expected to reach the vicinity of the Blackfoot village, and, from the present indications, a desperate game would have to be played before the jewel could be abstracted from the treacherous hand of Woo-wol-na. It was well that the lover had brought Nick Whiffles with him, for alone he had already worse than failed.

"If I had counted upon any double-dealing like this," said he, "I would have brought a force with me that would have compelled him to perform his part of the bargain."

"I don't know as it would have done," replied Nick; "when a red-skin finds he is outwitted, he's apt to get desperate and play old Harry."

"What would he do?"

"If he found he couldn't keep the gal, like enough he'd sink his tomahawk into her head, so you couldn't get her."

The two men loitered purposely on the way, so as to make sure of giving the North-west Company abundant time to get out of their reach. This was easily done, and early in the afternoon they caught sight of the returning canoes. Nick paddled up beside them to learn whether there was anything worth knowing. He was told that Woo-wol-na was there, and it was of him that they had purchased the valuable lot of peltries that they were carrying back with them.

Several cautiously-put questions failed to discover that they knew anything about Miona. The Indians had probably taken care to keep her out of the way of all visitors, as it will be remembered that five years before no signs were seen of her or her mother when the Hudson's Bay men made their visit to the same place on the same errand.

These indications, although very slight, were pronounced favorable by Nick Whiffles, and Ned Mackintosh was not a little encouraged by his statement to that effect.

"You see, if Woo-wol-na is there, I kin go straight into the village without any dodgin' or sarcumventin', and I kin find out for myself how the land lays."

"But he will be there to resist you none the less. You know his son?"

"Yes; he's an ugly young cub; he hates me like pizen, and would rather put a ball through me than not."

The afternoon was about half gone when the two men came opposite a small creek, which put in from the northern side of the river, and which was not the one that drew Ned into captivity. Nick paused opposite it, and remarked:

"You've seen it before, Ned, but notice it now."

"One glance will tell me all I can know about it," here plied, looking in the direction indicated. "Why should I feel any special interest in it?"

"My idee is that after we start, instead of going up the river, we'll go up the creek."

"What is to be gained by that, as we shall have to return, or make an overland journey for a long distance?"

"One reason is that I think I can throw the varmints off the trail, as they wouldn't be apt to think of our doing such a thing; and then by making a tramp of about thirty miles, I kin strike another stream that will take us into the south branch of the Saskatchewan."

"If that is the case it is the thing we should do by all means," replied his young companion. "I never knew that such a thing were possible. How near are we now to the village?"

"It is something like five miles from here; I'm goin' to take you within a half-mile or thereabouts and then leave you while I go ahead and racky-noiter."

"At night-time?"

"That's the time to go prowlin' round the home of the varmints, fur you mustn't forgit they've got as sharp eyes as you, and the hardest part of a scout's business isn't to see, but to keep himself from being seen."

At last the point was reached where the rendezvous was to take place. Whiffles ran the canoe close in beneath the undergrowth, where there was no likelihood of its being seen from the river, and cautioned his friend to be careful about permitting himself to be seen by any passing up or down the river. When they were close to the village, it was by no means improbable that some of the leading Indians might be near at hand, and the presence of a stranger so near the village would be certain to excite suspicion on the part of Woo-wol-na.

"I'll leave Calamity with you, as I don't need him," said the hunter, moving away; "the pup has good eyes, and he'll be good help to you in watchin', and don't git impatient if I ain't back afore the night's half-gone."

A minute later the trapper was making his way through the woods with the long, steady stride peculiar to him. There was a thoughtful expression upon his face, for none realized more deeply than he, the momentous errand upon which he was engaged.

The distance was short, and he was not long in reaching the Indian village. He walked boldly in among the lodges, and inquired for Woo-wol-na, but to his surprise learned that he was absent. When he asked whether he was hunting or fishing, and when he would return, he found no one able to answer his question.

After some pointless palaver, he made inquiry for Miona, as he said he wished to speak with her before passing through the village.

The answer to this was the same as the reply to the others. No one could tell where she was.

Nick was fairly taken aback for the time. He had

not counted upon any such rebuff as this, and he did not know what it meant; but that it meant something he had no doubt, and something iminal to her for whom he was searching.

He remained a half-hour or more doing his utmost to learn something, but failing altogether. Finally he concluded to return to Mackintosh with his report, and defer any further attempt to penetrate the mystery until he could see Woo-wol-na; when, unexpectedly, he encountered the chief face to face. Nick at once demanded to see Miona. Woo-wol-na's reply was but a single sentence—but it struck Nick Whiffles like a Minie rifle-ball. He turned white, staggered back—then recovered himself, and listened to the chief's brief but emphatic words of explanation. Without another word the old guide strode away into the woods to tell Ned Mackintosh the fearful tidings.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GRAVE VISIT.

NICK WHIFFLES was not a man to cultivate the niceties of speech, and when he came in the presence of Ned Mackintosh he quickly uttered the words that were upon the end of his tongue.

"I see'd Woo-wol-na, and he tells me that the gal is dead!"

"WHAT!" demanded the young man, recoiling and staring at him, as if he doubted the evidences of his senses.

"That's what he says, but I don't believe it; curse his pict'er!"

The lover gave a sigh of relief.

"How you startled me! Tell me all you have learned about it."

The hunter then proceeded to relate what the reader has already learned, adding:

"He said that Miona died a week ago, and was buried near the village, and if I wanted him, he would show me her grave."

"What did you say to the scoundrel?"

"It came to me so sudden like, that I b'lieved it, and started to see you; but as I come through the woods, I had time to think of it, and I made up my mind he had told me the biggest kind of a lie."

"But, Nick, maybe they have killed her, rather than let her fall into the hands of her friends," said the horrified Mackintosh, who could scarcely control his emotions. "A week ago! why was that the day she met you?"

"Jess so; and that's why I know she isn't dead—leastwise of no disease. Thar's this about it: they've been expecting me, and the cunning old varmint has got up the story to put me off the track, thinking that I would give up all hope of gettin' her, and leave her to become the wife of Red Bear, seein' as you was out of the way."

"Do you think Miona is in the village?"

"No; she can't be now, at least."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know; Woo-wol-na has took her to some place and left her in the keeping of some one—where she's goin' to stay till they think there's no danger of looking any more for her, and then she'll be turned over to Red Bear."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the excited Mackintosh, "what an outrage! I wish I had an army to wipe out that nest. What pleasure it would give me to do it! How are we going to find where she is?"

"I think it can be done," replied Whiffles, with his old confidential manner.

"If she is kept as a sort of prisoner somewhere, I suppose she will be visited by Red Bear?"

"Exactly, and all we've got to do is to watch the varmint, or some of the rest, and foller 'em."

"That's it!" exclaimed Ned, quite delighted; "after all it may be the best thing in the world for us, and make it all the more easy for us to get her out of their clutches."

"All very well—but this sort of work has got to be done mostly by Calamity and me, fur when you're trying to find the trail of a wolf, and a pack of wolves are huntin' fur your own trail, there's apt to be a condemned diffikility in the way."

It had been gradually growing darker while the men were talking, and they now sat down in the wood, close to each other, where their words would not be likely to attract the attention of any who might be lurking near.

They had plenty of food with them, but both were too excited to think of food or drink. They could only discuss the unexpected phase which the matter had taken, and the best way of overcoming the obstacles that now were in their path.

Further thought only served to convince Nick Whiffles of the truth of the suspicion he had expressed regarding Woo-wol-na. A man who understood Indian character as well as did he, could hardly be expected to make a mistake in such a matter.

He knew that the hearts of both father and son were set upon gaining this priceless jewel as their own, and they were ready to do anything to accomplish that purpose. Nick had doubted the honesty of the Blackfoot chief at the time he made the promise years before, and he had now not a particle of doubt of his intended treachery.

There was one advantage gained by the whites. The manner of Nick when he received the startling announcement from Woo-wol-na was such as to convince the chief that his words were believed, and consequently that all attempts would be given over by the friends of Miona, looking to the obtaining possession of her.

Nick determined to work upon this vantage-ground, and, with characteristic sagacity, he resolved to confirm the Blackfoot in this impression. He told Ned, that on the morrow he would visit the village again, would ask to see the spot where Miona was buried, and would so act as to remove all suspicion from the mind of their enemy.

"I b'lieve the old serpent will be looking for me to-night," said he. "I come away in such a hurry that I didn't think any of 'em got a chance to follow me, but they will be on the look-out to night."

"They certainly cannot discover us in such an out-of-the-way place as this."

"Not if we take care of ourselves—so I'll just pull the boat up out of the way where they won't be likely to run ag'in' us."

Stooping down the trapper drew the canoe clear up on the grass, so that none of it rested in the water at all.

He had scarcely done so when Calamity gave utterance to a low, ominous growl.

"Sh!" whispered the master; "we haven't been home to soon. What is it, pup?"

The dog added one or two mutterings, so faint they were barely audible, but they were sufficient for Nick, for they told him that Indians were close at hand.

Inclining his ear, the trapper now detected the faint dip of paddles—so faint indeed as to prove that the red-skins were advancing with unusual caution, and that at that moment they were near. Nick made a gesture of silence, and Calamity instantly became as one dead, while, as a matter of course, Ned did not stir.

Whiffles reached the edge of the water, on his hands and knees, and carefully peered out in the darkness. The gloom was too great for him to see with any distinctness, but guided by his sense of hearing, he managed to discern the outlines of a shadowy boat, moving very slowly up-stream, and only a few feet away from land. As it came directly abreast, he observed four Indians seated in it.

At this precise point they halted, so near that he could have toss'd his hat into the boat, and then they exchanged a few words. As they used their own tongue, and were so close, Nick had no difficulty in comprehending their words, which, liberally interpreted, were as follows:

"He came up the river, and the trappers said he had a companion with him."

"Did you find where he went?"

"We lost him in the woods, but he lingers somewhere near us."

"He is the friend of Woo-wol-na?"

"But the enemy of Red Bear."

Nick Whiffles recognized Red Bear himself as the one who uttered the last remark, and it proved that he and his three companions were seeking himself and Mackintosh, unsuspicious of his real identity, for the purpose of putting them out of the way, and ending all trouble regarding Miona.

The Blackfeet exchanged a few words more of speculation upon the whereabouts of the two men, and then they gradually drifted down-stream beyond hearing.

What Nick Whiffles had seen and heard now fully decided his course. He had not a particle of doubt that Miona had been removed from the village and was held a close prisoner in some lonely place at no great distance, and before anything could be done in rescuing her it was necessary to ascertain where this place was.

Furthermore, it was evident that the Blackfeet were not convinced of the success of the stratagem in making it appear that the captive was dead, and Red Bear, the one among them most interested, had resolved on putting out of the way the old friend of his father, and the companion who was with him.

Hence, as preliminary to any step in the business, it was necessary to throw dust in the eyes of the Blackfeet; and this Nick Whiffles determined to do effectually and at once.

He determined, therefore, at the earliest break of day on the morrow, boldly to enter the Blackfoot village alone, and there ask of Woo-wol-na to see the grave where Miona was buried. Then it was his purpose to affect such a belief in her demise as would effectually deceive the Indians.

After which, working with his usual caution and skill, Nick believed himself competent to detect the hiding-place of Miona, then, he and Ned would engage in the "tug of war."

This course of action agreed upon, the old trapper returned to the edge of the river to watch and listen for the return of the Indian canoe, but he heard nothing of it, and concluded that it had crossed over and descended upon the opposite side.

As there was no likelihood of being discovered, they then lay down to rest, Calamity as before acting the part of sentinel. He secured all the sleep he could through the day, so that it was no deprivation or hardship for him to keep awake during the night, even though his years were beginning to press heavily upon him.

The slumbers of both were undisturbed, and both awoke much refreshed and in good spirits. Ned Mackintosh especially found himself the possessor of a pleasant degree of hopefulness in great contrast to his sensations of the day before.

The last of their food was eaten, and by the time the sun had fairly risen, Nick was paddling downstream, with a slowness that became one engaged upon such a sad expedition as was he.

The first persons he encountered upon landing at the village, were Woo-wol-na and Red Bear, who stood together talking earnestly upon some subject. At sight of the visitor they instantly ceased. Nick Whiffles's knowledge of human nature was too great for the young Blackfoot to hide his vindictive hatred of the man who was seeking the prize that he had come to believe belonged to him alone.

Woo-wol-na, on the contrary, was quite gracious in his manner, and seemed to entertain genuine regard for the old hunter, who so many years before had done him such valuable service when hard pressed by his enemies; but, savage-like, his whole interests were wrapped up in those of his son, and

he was prepared to sacrifice anything or anybody who stood in the way of their accomplishment.

Nick greeted him in the usual formal manner customary at such times, and then questioned him regarding the death of Miona.

How long since did it occur? Of what character did her disease appear to be? How long was she sick? Did she seem to suffer much? Did she leave any parting messages for her friends?

These inquiries were all made for the purpose of deceiving the chief into the belief of their sincerity.

The reply in substance was that she had died a week before. The symptoms, as he described them, were those of a violent fever, short and occasioning great suffering. The medicine-man of the village had done all that was possible for her, and her death was sincerely mourned by the entire village, who were all attached to her. As her mind was wandering during the entire time of her sickness, she left no tangible message for any of her pale-faced friends who might seek her.

Then Nick stated that he would like to visit her grave before carrying word to her home many miles away. Woo-wol-na volunteered at once to lead him to it, and the two started.

As is well known, it is the frequent custom of the Indians of the North-west to bury their dead above ground—that is, by placing them upon a sort of scaffold, where they are carefully wrapped up and left to decay by the action of time and the elements. This is often done, but, at the same time, as many, if not more, are placed beneath the sod, more after the manner of civilized life.

Woo-wol-na conducted the visitor to a beautiful spot about a tenth of a mile distant, where there was the appearance of a newly-made grave, where, he said, Miona had been buried amid the lamentations of all the warriors and maidens of his tribe.

Then, with unexpected deference, the old chief withdrew and left him alone with his sorrow.

Knowing that he was carefully observing him all this time, the trapper affected a great deal more of grief than he felt, and when he had remained a proper time, he bade the grave farewell, and was escorted to the village by the chief, where he embarked in his canoe again and started up-river. Ned was taken in a secret manner, and by lying down in the canoe, was not observed by the lynx-eyed Blackfeet watching the trapper far on his way. The shrewd old man so well knew that he would thus be under surveillance, that he resolved to return all the way to his cabin and thus disarm the red scoundrels of all suspicion both of Ned's existence and of his (Nick's) own want of faith in their story regarding Miona's death.

He chuckled with a satisfaction so hearty that, cautious as he was by nature and training, he could hardly refrain from a good, loud laugh, as he paddled away, hour by hour, while the red-skins, with almost superhuman efforts, kept along like shadows on his path.

"Trot along, ye greasy vagabones!" he said, in a low tone; "we'll give yer a twist that'll make yer devil's face look worse'n that hole ye dropped my boy in."

Silently, steadily he paddled, keeping Ned close and quiet in the canoe bottom, until they neared the cabin, when the old man permitted the younger to take the blade, which he did in silence, while faithful Calamity, like a grim sentinel, stood in the canoe's bow as if to relieve his old master from all further responsibility.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BACK TRAIL.

"Now," said Nick, as they sat down in the cabin, "we can turn about and go back a'gin'. We've got rid of the condemnedest difficulty that we had."

"And all this time what is poor Miona suffering?" replied Ned, resting his hand upon his elbow, and looking the very picture of misery.

"She ain't suffering half as much as you," replied Nick, who, like a thoughtful host, was preparing a meal for two very hungry men. "She don't know she's dead, or that we think she's gone under."

"But how she must long for our coming! What weary years of waiting she has spent, and now she does not know whether they are to end or not. When do we start down-stream again?"

"It will be dark in an hour; we can make a good supper by that time, and I'll take a week's food with us, so we needn't stop to shoot game when some of the varmints are near."

Nick was walking toward his fire-place, when he suddenly paused and looked back at his young friend with a peculiar expression.

"Ned, what do you s'pose I b'lieve?"

"I am sure I can not tell," he replied, looking up in no little surprise at the abruptness of the question.

I think I know where to look fur the gal."

"Where?" was the eager inquiry. "Certainly not Grizzly Bear Cave?"

"No; up that creek that I p'inted out to you as we passed. Mind, I don't say she's there," added Nick; "I only s'pects it."

"You wouldn't suspect it without good cause," said Ned, "so I will take that grain of consolation."

"It's many a year ago and more that I helped Woo-wol-na out of his scrape with the Shoshone. I got several purty good digs myself in that scrimmage, so that I was carried back and laid up in one of thar lodges for the rest of the winter; and I happened to think just now that thar village then stood on the bank of the creek, about ten miles up it. The tribe staid thar for several years, and then moved down to where they now ar'. When they done it, they left the old lodges standing, and put up new lodges along the river. Now, the Blackfoot allers

puts up his house with the idee that it's going to last awhile, and I've a mind that some of them old lodges are still standing, and would make the best kind of shelter fur a chap that got lost in the woods."

"Have you seen any of them within a few years?"

"By mighty!" exclaimed Nick, in considerable excitement, "I slept in one of them lodges the very summer you left me, so they're likely to be some of 'em there still."

"And you think Miona has been removed to that place?"

"That's it! It may be that I'm wrong, but I swow to gracious, that if she ain't there, I don't know where to look for her."

"Don't say that," said Ned, pleadingly; "it will be hard enough to give up when we are compelled to. Until then don't let me know that you can ever reach a point where you feel unable to do anything."

"We're going to have a little moon to-night, though I'd just as lief get along without it as with it."

Nick spent the greater part of an hour in cooking meat for the expedition. He had learned in the great school of necessity, and he worked with that skill and dexterity that soon gave him all the food he needed.

Ned and he occupied but a few minutes in eating their evening meal, and then, accompanied by Calamity, they set out again for the river, where they had left their canoe lying. Their food was placed within, the dog took his accustomed place, and just as the shades of night were closing upon forest and river, the paddle was dipped into the water, as they began what was to prove a most eventful journey.

All night long the iron arms of the trapper kept at work with the regularity of a steam engine, and seemingly without tiring any more than so much machinery. Mackintosh slept the greater part of the night, and when daylight came, they landed and made a few hours' halt. Then, under the direction of Nick Whiffles, Ned took the paddle, and they began stealing their way along shore down-stream; for, above all things, it was now important that they should not be seen by any of their enemies.

The greater part of the day was spent in stealing along in this cautious manner, constantly on the look-out for their enemies. Near the middle of the afternoon, they had a narrow escape from running directly in sight of a large canoe full of Indians, but, fortunately, they "lacked water," and ran in under cover of the bank in time to escape discovery.

Just at nightfall the mouth of the creek was reached, and they landed. The boat was pulled up out of sight, and Calamity was left to guard the entrance, and the two withdrew out of sight altogether of any who might pass during daylight even.

Young Mackintosh could scarcely conceal his anxiety and impatience. If Nick had settled in his mind where they were to look for Miona, he saw no reason why they should not press on at once and take time by the forelock.

"We expect to make our search there, Nick, and why wait until our foes are ahead of us?"

"Trust to me, trust to me," was the reply. "It may be that Red Bear will come down the creek to-night, and, if that is so, we'll run afoul of him, as sure as the world."

"Why not go overland? It's only a matter of ten miles or so, and we can make it in a couple of hours."

"And leave a trail, that'll be sartin to betray us."

"Well, as you please then," replied Ned, settling himself back, in the expectation of spending a number of weary hours.

"You ought to have i'arned the virtue of patience when you was Ned Hazel, trampin' in the woods with me. Don't you know the Esquimaux of the upper Hudson Bay will set for a dozen hours by the air-hole in the ice waiting for the seal to come up and git speared?"

"I hope you don't expect we are going to do the same?"

"Not unless it is necessary, but we must wait; the Whiffles family always had the faculty of waiting. Fact of it was, some of 'em waited too long, and, fur all I know, some of 'em are still waiting—Hullo!"

At this juncture, Calamity gave utterance to a low, almost inaudible growl, and springing to their feet, both the men were at his side in an instant.

The faint moon, of which Nick had spoken, had risen, and was already overhead, so that they could both see to the opposite side of the narrow creek.

"Sh!" whispered the trapper, "some one is comin' sartin."

The ripple of oars was plainly discernible, and while they were straining their eyes to pierce the gloom, they saw a small canoe, with two Indians in it, making its way up-stream.

It was near the center of the creek, and moving in a manner which showed the occupants had no fear or thought of discovery upon the part of corsairs or interlopers.

Nick was especially anxious to learn whether one of the men was Red Bear or not, but there was not sufficient light for the purpose, although he was satisfied in his own mind that the young chief was in the boat.

The two men scarcely breathed until the canoe had passed up out of sight. Then the trapper noiselessly launched his own canoe, and entering, Calamity was placed in the bow.

"The pup can see further in the dark than his master, and when he can't see one of the varmints, he can scent him. You see, it won't do to run afoul of Red Bear."

"Why won't it do?" demanded Ned. "There are as many in this boat. We have rifles, and I carry a

Colt's revolver. We could put both of them out of our path as well as not, and I'd like to do it."

"When you've as many gray hairs in your head as I have, you won't be so eager to send a ball through the head of any critter that happens to cross your path."

"You won't shrink from it if it should become necessary?"

"Exactly; but it hain't become necessary, Ned; if Woo-wol-na keeps in our way, I'd shoot him; but if we kin get the gal out of their hands without harming a red-skin, I'm going to do it. When I was on my first war-path, it was just the other way, but I kin tell you, Ned, this killing people is a bad business any way you can fix it, and to my mind, any man is guilty that wants to do it."

"You are right," replied Ned, who could but agree with the humanitarian sentiments of the old hunter, who could pass through so many scenes of violence and bloodshed, and still, like a Christian warrior, retain a yearning love for peace and quietness.

"My whole heart is bent on gaining Miona from their hands," added the lover. "I have prayed and longed for this day; I can never leave American territory without her, and I will stop at no danger or sacrifice to accomplish my purpose."

"Just so," replied the imperturbable Nick, as he softly dipped his paddle and kept the boat to its course. "Your heart is full of love, and when a man is in that kettle, I take it that he's blind to prudence and common sense. If you was to undertake this business alone, the end of it would be that you would have your ha'r raised, and would go under afore you had fairly started."

The sober thought of Mackintosh admitted the truth of all the trapper had uttered, and he could not refuse to acquiesce in his cool judgment and prudent deliberation.

All this time the canoe was moving up the creek with the silence of some aquatic monster stealing his way through a gauntlet of enemies to some safe retreat in the ocean beyond. There was little likelihood of the boat ahead checking its speed, or being overtaken by its pursuer; but nevertheless there was a possibility, and Nick Whiffles was not the one to let his haste run him into any "condemned diffikilt" of that nature.

Calamity showed a realizing sense of the responsibility that rested upon his canine shoulders. Sitting on his hanches, with his forepaws resting upon the gunwale of the prow, he peered into the darkness, every sense on the alert for the dusky foes in advance.

The sound of a rustling leaf did not escape, nor did it deceive him. He had hunted and roamed too many years with his master to need any instructions at this late day. Nick knew exactly what the capabilities of the brute were, and precisely how far he was to be depended upon; so, while he kept the canoe cautiously gliding up one bank, he found time to hold whispered converse with his companion, scarcely looking ahead, but leaving that duty to his faithful friend.

Mile after mile glided behind them, and they were drawing near the spot where they believed the beautiful, the loving, the trusting Miona was longingly awaiting their coming.

Ned Mackintosh became silent and thoughtful. The belief that the critical moment for which he had been waiting four long, weary years, was at hand; that she toward whom his thoughts had turned, during all that time, when the broad ocean rolled between them, was now within a few miles, and that every moment was drawing them nearer together, filled him again with a nervous uneasiness, which he controlled with much difficulty, and which did not escape the observant eye of the old trapper.

"You must git over that," admonished the latter, "for if you don't, you won't be good for any thing, and I'll leave you ashore."

He strove manfully, and after a time he gained more mastery over himself.

"I will be all right when the time comes," he replied.

"The time has come now," said Nick, as with one sweep of his paddle he ran the prow against the land, and stepped out.

"What does this mean?" asked Ned, in some astonishment.

"Them lodges I was talking about ain't two hundred yards from this spot."

"Is it possible?" was the exclamation of the young man, as he stepped out; "and what are we to do now?"

"You're to lay here, while me and the pup go forward and rackynoiter a little; and, Ned," he added, in his most impressive manner, "do you promise to mind me to the very letter?"

"Of course I do."

"All right; then don't move six feet from here till I give you word. I'll be back soon."

And the next moment Ned Mackintosh was alone.

About an hour passed, when Nick Whiffles returned with the noiselessness that characterized all his movements, and stooping down beside his young friend, he placed his hand upon his shoulder, and said:

"Ned, we've found the place where the varmints have hid the gal!"

CHAPTER X.

A FINGER ON THE TRIGGER.

AFTER making his startling announcement to Ned Mackintosh, Nick Whiffles explained it in substance, as follows:

Upon leaving him in company with Calamity, the two had moved stealthily forward, until they reached the desolate clearing where stood the "ruins" of what had once been a large and stirring Blackfoot village. These ruins consisted of three lodges only,

in two of which lights were burning. In one of these were seated Red Bear and two warriors, the three engaged in smoking and discussing some important matter.

There was difficulty in gaining a view of the interior of the other, as the entrance was closed; but, after lying down in front of it for a half-hour, it was opened, and an old squaw, that Nick recognized as the mother of Red Bear, came out and went into the lodge in which were seated Red Bear and his three companions.

This was the very lodge in which Nick Whiffles had lain an invalid more than thirty years before; and as the buffalo-skin door was pulled aside, he saw, plainly, and distinctly, Miona seated upon the ground, in front of a small fire, engaged in knitting some bead ornament. The firelight shone full upon her face, so that there was no mistake about it.

"Nick," said Mackintosh, at this point in his narrative, "as you love me, grant me one favor."

"What is it?"

"Take me to the spot where you crouched, when you saw her, there let me stay one minute and look upon her face."

"But the danger—"

"You can trust me. Remember I have not seen her for four years. I can be as quiet and stealthy about it as you."

"Well, I'll do it. Come along!"

They stole their way through the wood and across the clearing in the direction of one of the lodges, in which a light could be seen shining, moving with the stealth of men who knew that a single false step would be paid by the penalty of their lives.

The whole affair was in opposition to the sense of Nick Whiffles, but he could not well refuse the request of his young friend, made as it was with such direct earnestness to him.

Finally Nick paused, and whispered:

"Crawl to that spot and lay flat down, and if the gal hasn't changed her position, you'll see her face a blanned sight plainer than you can see mine."

Ned did as requested, and complete success crowned the effort. He saw Miona seated in front of a fire engaged with some fancy work, and seemingly as quiet and unsuspicious as though seated among her own friends.

Her head was bent, so that the view was not as good as could be desired, but such as it was, it made the heart of the lover bound with delight.

Av, there she sat; the loved of his heart; she of whom he had dreamed for the four years past, and for whom he had hastened to cross the ocean—she who returned his yearning affection, and who, he fondly believed, was at that moment thinking of him as yet far away from her.

The wish of Mackintosh was that she would raise her head, before he was compelled to withdraw, and this pleasure was also afforded him.

While his eyes were intently fixed upon her countenance, she suddenly looked up, as if some noise at the entrance of the lodge had attracted her attention. This afforded the very view for which Ned was so anxious. There was a startled expression upon the face of Miona, that rendered her beauty more striking. The lustrous eyes looked darker, and the excitement gave her a flushed appearance that rendered her captivating in the highest degree.

"Oh! if she but knew I were here!" sighed my hero, who felt an almost irresistible impulse to rush forward and claim her, "if she would but come forth, and go with us at once!"

In a moment she lowered her gaze again, and resumed her work; and feeling that it was incumbent upon him to do so, Mackintosh withdrew and rejoined the trapper.

"Now I posse you feel easier," remarked the latter, as they stealthily retreated to the cover of the woods again.

"Yes, and I am thankful to you for the kindness you showed me. I had a good view of her face. And now what do you propose to do?"

"We must wait here, and find out what they're driving at. We mought get the gal, but it won't hurt to wait awhile, and it's better to be sartin afore you move in such a matter."

Ned supposed he was right, but it was very hard to be governed by the same deliberation, at a time when he believed that a bold dash would end the matter at once in their favor, but he forced himself to assent and wait the pleasure of his old friend.

The entrance to the other lodge remained closed, so that it was impossible to tell what was going on in there; but there was little doubt their consultation concerned Miona.

It was very easy, and would have been very characteristic in Red Bear to use force in compelling her to become his wife; but it seemed that he hesitated at this step, until it became certain that no other means would succeed.

Nick Whiffles more than once was on the point of stealing forward and apprising Miona of their presence so that she might be prepared to second any movement in her own behalf; but he resolutely restrained himself.

However, he thought the time had come when Calamity could take a hand in the business, and he turned to Ned.

"Have you got pencil and paper?"

"Yes."

"Then git something ready, and we'll try and send the pup in with it."

Mackintosh was glad enough to do so, and as well as he could in the darkness, he penned the following:

"DEAREST MIONA:

"Nick and I are near you, watching for a chance to get you out of the hands of your enemies. By the assistance of you and him I was saved from death

in the cavern. He has been to see Woo-wol-na, who told him that you were dead. As you already know, the old chief is determined that you shall be the wife of Red Bear, and has attempted to deceive us; Nick let him think he believed his falsehood, but we understood him. You have been removed here, so as to be without the reach of your friends. You must remain quiet, and it will be well to affect an acquiescence to whatever wishes they may have regarding you. I await Nick's movements, who is slow, but who doubtless knows better what to do than I. If you can, send me a few words back.

EDWARD MACKINTOSH."

This, with a piece of paper from his note-book and his pencil, was fastened around the neck of Calamity, so that she might have an opportunity to reply.

As there seemed to be no dogs at all belonging to the Blackfeet in the village, there was considerable risk in sending Calamity upon such an errand. If seen, he would be recognized as belonging to Nick, and the extraordinary precautions that the two had taken, during the preceding few days, would thus be entirely thrown away.

But there was no one to whose sagacity it was safer to trust than to this same canine's. He knew the value of keeping himself "scarce" at such a time, and, if there was any possible way of doing it, he might be depended upon to do it.

Nick took pains to explain with great particularity what he expected his animal to do, and then told him to go.

Calamity advanced straight toward the clearing, until he had passed half-way across, when he paused and looked about him to see if the coast was clear. Everything seemed satisfactory, and he kept straight ahead, and the next instant darted into the door of the lodge.

As he did so, Nick, who had stolen back to his former position, and was watching, saw her start, utter a slight scream, and make ready to combat the entrance of the dog, but the next instant she recognized and welcomed him, hastening forward to take the paper from his neck.

Then she read it with an eager interest impossible to describe, and when finished, raised her eye devoutly upward, thanking Heaven for the answer to her prayer. Then, with pencil in hand, she leaned toward the fire, and busied herself in replying to the missive of her lover.

"By mighty! ain't she givin him a good dose?" muttered Nick, as he saw her turn it over, after the lapse of several minutes, and continued her rapid penmanship upon the other side of the leaf. "Wal, I s'pose the gal loves him, and of course she must have a good deal to say to him."

By-and-by it was finished, and then she fastened it very carefully to the neck of the dog, securing with it the pencil also, and made ready for the return of her faithful express.

At this critical moment, the door of the other lodge opened, and Red Bear issued forth, walking straight toward the one where Miona and the dog were sitting. It was a dangerous instant, and looked as if discovery were unavoidable. There was no way for Calamity to slip out, without being seen by the chief, who would be certain to identify him at the first glance.

Nick Whiffles stealthily raised the hammer of his rifle, prepared to fire at Red Bear if the discovery should take place, for it now looked as if it was to come to that.

But the wonderful sagacity of Calamity proved equal to the emergency. His sharp ear detected the approach, and he seemed to comprehend at the same instant that it was impossible for him to escape from the lodge. As quick as a flash, he whisked behind Miona and crawled beneath the skins, upon a pack of which she was sitting.

Nick Whiffles witnessed this maneuver of his dog, with a grin of exultation, and then carefully made his way back to where Ned was awaiting him. Here he related what he had seen, adding:

"The pup knows more than both of us; trust Calamity, I say, for the pup has never deceived me yet."

He then said there was no telling how long Red Bear might remain in the lodge, and if Mackintosh chose, he could take his old position, and watch the interview. This the young man gladly did, and found his place such that he had a full view of both.

Mona still had her seat upon the skins, and Ned fancied that she had so spread out her dress as to help hide Calamity. Red Bear sat several feet away, his face turned full upon the girl, and the appearance of both showed that they were engaged in earnest converse.

Mona had probably taken lessons from the note sent her by her lover, and her heart was so full of "new-fledged hope" that she could well assume a graciousness of manner toward the Blackfoot, even though she knew he was soon to have so rude an awakening.

He had a large pipe of yellow clay in his mouth, and undoubtedly was doing his "level best" to persuade the beautiful young pale-face to become his queen, and to forget her ties of blood and kindred, in the happiness of a consort of so brave a warrior as himself.

Mona listened, and was more disposed to be lenient than she had ever yet showed herself in his presence, and the red scamp was in high feather over his good fortune.

But Mona unconsciously incurred a danger in encouraging Red Bear too much. If her manner was such as to make him believe that she would be proud to become his wife, he saw no reason why she should delay so long in taking that position. He wished her to join him and his warriors in his canoe, and with him go to the village down the river, there to go

through the impressive ceremony of marrying the most celebrated young warrior of the Blackfoot tribe.

Miona was not prepared to consent to this, and she asked for a delay of twenty-four hours at least; but Red Bear had already submitted to her whims until his patience was well-nigh exhausted.

He used all the persuasive eloquence of an Indian lover to induce her to change her mind; he said that Woo-wol-na was expecting their coming at the town that very night; that he expected the ceremony would be celebrated without fail, and there was danger in thwarting the wishes of such a great man. His boat was ready, and if Red Bear had only known the Ossian Serenade, there is little doubt but that he would have sung:

"Oh, come with me, in my light canoe,
Where the sea is calm and the sky is blue,
Oh, come with me for I long to go
To the isles where the mango apples grow."

As may be supposed, young Mackintosh was a deeply interested spectator of the scene. Of course, it was beyond his power to comprehend with any certainty the meaning of the words uttered, but the actions and gesticulations of each showed that there was considerable feeling and that it was increasing.

Perhaps the consciousness that she had friends near at hand, made Miona somewhat bolder and more defiant than she would have been otherwise. Certain it is that she had begun by heeding the request of her lover, and had been usually bland and conciliatory. This, however, had produced the opposite effect from what was intended, and he had made urgent demands for her to leave this "country seat" at once.

She had dallied with him as long as she could, and finding herself unable to convince him of his error, she had ended by flatly refusing to accompany him.

Red Bear rose from his seat in his anger and gesticulated savagely toward her. At this juncture Calamity whisked out of the lodge so skillfully that even Miona herself did not see him, and hurried straight to his master with the missive about his neck.

Mackintosh would have hastened to the animal to claim the precious letter he bore, had he not been enchain'd to the spot by the threatening character of the interview between the Indian and the loved one of his heart.

There was no telling but what the savage, in his fury, might offer her violence, and he felt it incumbent to remain near enough to protect her.

"Let the dusky scoundrel but attempt to lay his hand upon her," muttered Ned, as he cautiously brought his rifle round to position, "and I'll crack that shaven skull of his quicker than lightning."

Red Bear gesticulated furiously, but as he still held no weapon in his hand, Mackintosh reserved his fire. He seemed to be arguing vehemently to Miona, who sat quiet and collected, still engaged in her bead-work, and only now and then looking up in his face.

What her replies were could only be divined, but the passion of the Indian seemed to increase, until there could be no doubt that the girl was really in danger. Suddenly Ned saw a knife gleaming in his hand, and he felt that it would not do to delay longer.

So he aimed straight at the head of the Blackfoot chief.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE WOODS.

At this critical juncture, a shadowy arm passed over the shoulder of Ned Mackintosh, and grasped his rifle in such a manner that when the trigger was pressed, the hammer fell upon the sinewy fingers instead of the percussion.

"What do you mean?" demanded the excited young man, turning angrily upon Whiffles; "are you a friend of that red demon's?"

"Easy; I've been watching the varmint, Ned, and if there was any danger of his harmin' a hair of her head, my ball would have been ahead of yours; but he's only done it to scare her; he thinks too much of her to want to lose her by his own foolishness. Look ag'in and tell me what you see."

Casting his eyes in the direction of the lodge, the lover saw that Red Bear had retreated and seated himself again—another proof of the superior sagacity of the old trapper.

"Here's your pencil and your paper; take 'em and git out of this, fur it ain't safe to trust you here. I'll take yer place."

Ned did as commanded, withdrawing deep into the woods, where he was certain of being beyond the sight and hearing of friends and enemies alike. He held in his hand a letter from Miona, and he was determined to read it even though he was compelled to risk not a little in doing so.

Reaching a spot where he felt all was secure he crouched down upon the ground, like a man engaged in doing a guilty thing, and cautiously raked some dry leaves together. Upon these he spread a number of dead twigs, and then drawing forth his match-safe struck and touched a light to them.

As the twig blaze flamed up, he looked furtively around; but he was in a sort of hollow and dense undergrowth which inclosed him on every side, and leaning over the blaze, he eagerly devoured the hastily written lines.

"DEAREST EDWARD:

"What you and Nick Whiffles do, must be done to-night, for I am to be taken back to the village to-morrow, where I will be more closely guarded than my poor father was four years ago. I have been expecting you, knowing that you must have escaped, thinking your love would have hastened your movements more than they have; and when I was taken here, I was really in despair, for I thought

you would never find me. I am more glad than I can tell you that you are so near me, and I hope soon to be with you, and clasped in the arms of father and mother, who, you said, were going to cross the ocean with you. I shall wait and listen for some signal from Nick, and be ready to perform my part in ending this dreadful captivity, that becomes worse and worse each day—"

Then followed some very loving manifestations, and it closed with a prayer and a signature, "Thine Own."

The Phantom Princess, during the years spent in the wilds of America, had not forgotten her duty to her child, and so it came to pass that she expressed herself with as much fluency upon paper as she did in conversation, and Ned Mackintosh, in his romantic love for her, at times fancied that she still excelled him in her literary knowledge.

The precious letter was carefully read over, and the tiny fire was hastily stamped out and all was darkness again.

"I shall have to let Nick know what I have been doing," he soliloquized, as he walked away, "for he must be made to understand that it won't do to wait till to-morrow before moving further in this case."

He heard nothing from the other lodge in which the light shone, but, as he carefully made his way to where Nick was still acting the part of guardian, he caught the glimpse of a moving figure in front of Miona's cabin, and he instantly inquired of Nick what it meant.

"Red Bear has just left to go to the other cabin. I think he's goin' after that old squaw to help carry the gal to the canoe."

"And we are to lie here and look on?"

The trapper replied to this question by uttering a low whistle, which instantly caught the listening ear of Miona. She threw a sort of blanket around her shoulders, started to her feet and came to the entrance of the lodge, looking around in the darkness for some other aiding signal.

The whistle was repeated, and the next moment she came hurrying across the clearing, and immediately after was with her friends.

The time was critical, but Ned Mackintosh took the slight figure in his stout arms and pressed her fervently to him, kissing her face again and again, and murmured:

"Miona, my own, I have you at last, and no power on earth shall separate us again."

She could only sob and murmur her love in return, while Nick couldn't see the necessity of either just then.

"There! there! that'll do," said he; "wait till we git where the varmints are a little more scarce than here."

Mackintosh released the girl from his embrace, but still fondly holding one hand in his own, turned to the old trapper, and said:

"Lead the way, Nick, and we will follow."

Back again across the clearing the three shadowy figures stealthily made their way, while Calamity, like the pointer of a hunter, trotted in advance.

Just within the cover of the woods, Whiffles paused a moment, and touching the shoulder of Mackintosh, pointed to the lodge they had just left. Following the direction of his finger, the two saw Red Bear and his mother hurrying toward the building, with the intention of taking the "queen" forcibly to the village.

Time was precious, and without waiting another moment, the three groped through the wood until they reached the edge of the creek, where the canoe lay. Noiselessly and speedily they took their seats in this, and Nick pushed out into the stream.

Instead of turning the prow downward toward Elk river, he continued on up the creek, several powerful strokes of his paddle sending the boat directly by the lodges, and on into the gloom beyond.

This was barely accomplished when a couple of quick whoops announced that the flight of Miona had been discovered, and the hurrying search had already begun. With the signal of alarm, the girl shrunk closer to the side of her lover, as if she felt that there was now her only safety.

"Have no fear," he whispered, as he gathered his arms about her; "they shall never, never take you from me."

"I know it," she replied, her heart full of a delight which had only come to her dreamily and vaguely during the past years.

Nick Whiffles's whole attention was given to the management of the boat, which he sent forward with astonishing power and speed. It was observable that the creek was narrowing, and the current was growing more rapid as they advanced. Only a few miles more could the water be turned to account. The trapper was carrying out the purpose he had announced, of attempting their escape by a new route. Instead of going down into the river, he intended to pass overland across the country to the stream which found its way into the south branch of the Saskatchewan, and so on to Fort Churchill in the Far North, where the parents of Miona were so anxiously awaiting her coming.

With the sounds of alarm that Red Bear made, when the flight of the girl was discovered, all outcry ceased, and the fugitives knew not what steps were being taken by way of pursuit. Nick believed that the Blackfeet would entertain no suspicion of what had taken place until the morrow, and their efforts would all be misdirected between now and then, so that these previous hours would be so much gained.

This pleasant belief, however, was dispelled by a discovery which Miona made at this moment. She told her lover that in the hurry of her flight from the lodge, at the summons of her friends, she had dropped the note he had sent her upon the ground, where she had left it lying, and where it would be sure to

catch the eye of Red Bear, the moment he entered and found she had fled.

"But I don't think he will be able to read it," she added, as Ned told it to Nick, "as he hasn't much education in the English language."

"That is unnecessary," replied the trapper; "he'll know what it means the very minute he sets eye on it, and he'll know that me and Ned have run away with you."

"But he will not suspect we have taken this direction," replied Mackintosh.

"He won't know it, but he'll 'spect it, and as like as not he's follerin' hard after us this very minute."

"Let him follow!" exclaimed Mackintosh. "If he catches us, are we powerless to help ourselves? For my part, I can't help believing I would experience a genuine pleasure in using that treacherous scamp as a target. Why was he fool enough to leave Miona alone, when it was so easy for her to slip out and make off?"

"He wouldn't have done it if he had known we war about, and she wouldn't have run away if she hadn't known we was."

Now and then Nick paused in his paddling for a few seconds and listened, but nothing of his pursuers was heard, and the only sound that reached their ears was that of the wind blowing through the trees around them.

The three noticed that quite a breeze was blowing, and that it was irregular and increasing. The faint moon, too, was obscured by flying clouds, and there was every indication of a rapidly approaching storm. The air was quite chilly, and Nick declared that a drenching, driving rain would be upon them by day-break.

"Will that be favorable or unfavorable to us?" asked Ned.

"It will be the worst thing in the world, for we're got to stop till the storm ends, and that'll give the varmints the time they want to find where we've gone, and chances are they'll overhaul us afore we kin git across to the other stream."

"But we are leaving no trail."

"That don't make no difference; just as soon as they larn we've headed toward the north, they'll know what p'int I'm amin' for, and they'll know how to head us off."

"Then we can turn back and take another direction."

Nick made no reply, for he did not wish to alarm his companions, but the course proposed by Mackintosh was the very one he wished to avoid. Turned back into the country again, with a band of Blackfeet between him and British territory, it would be almost impossible to escape discovery or recapture by these bloodhounds, who would watch every avenue of escape, and close around the three, with a celerity and certainty almost impossible to thwart.

Nick Whiffles knew another thing that was not especially pleasant to him, although no reference to it had yet escaped his lips, and it was certain that it would never be learned by any others through him.

His position toward Woo-wol-na was in one respect an anomalous one. The gratitude which that chief still retained for services done many years before, was such as to cause him to overlook the part he had acted in the rescue of Hugh Bandman from death; but, in forgetting that, the forbearance of the Blackfoot leader had reached its utmost limit. It was certain he would discover the part played by Nick in this business, which was far more serious in every respect.

For helping in the abduction of Miona, Woo-wol-na had no forgiveness, and none would be more ready or eager than he to take swift and sure vengeance upon the old trapper for it. In case Nick should succeed, he would be compelled to change the location of his "home" to some point where he would be safe beyond the vengeance of his enemies, who, infuriated by their disappointment, would burn the old cabin to the ground.

All this I say Nick fully understood, and there was a certain sadness in the thought; but, at the same time, it did not abate his energy for his friends in the least. He had gone into this business, fully understanding the risk involved, and yet he had done so, not willingly only, but with an eagerness to benefit those he loved so well, and to do an act of humanity, which his conscience told him was right.

Some three or four miles were passed, and then the creek became so narrow, and the current so rapid, that further progress in the canoe was out of the question. It was therefore run against the bank, and the three disembarked.

"Now, if I leave the boat here, the varmints will be sure to find it," said Nick, "and it'll show 'em just where to take our trail."

"Take it with us, for you'll need it at the other stream," said Mackintosh, stooping down to lift it from the water.

"No," replied the trapper, "we don't need it fur that. I'spose I got a dozen boats in the different streams around the country, and if we kin only make that creek, I know where to put my hand on what I want. This boat is quite hefty to carry with us, but I'll take it part way, so that it shan't help them any."

With which he lifted it over his head, and strode off through the woods, the lovers following, and Calamity in advance of all.

There could no longer be any doubt that a storm was rapidly gathering and would soon break upon them. The dim light of the moon was so obscured by the tumultuous clouds constantly sweeping past its face, that they made their way with considerable difficulty through the wood and over the broken country. Mackintosh noticed that the ground was rising so rapidly that they were ascending quite an elevation, perhaps some high ridge that was the water-shed of this section.

All at once, the wind increased to a gale, and several large drops of water struck the face of Mackintosh. Nick Whiffles made a sudden dive to the right, and plunged beneath an oak of dense growth, and beside which a large rock was discovered.

"That's the best we kin do," he called out, his voice hardly audible in the roaring wind; "back up ag'in it."

The lovers placed themselves against the rock, and the blanket of Mackintosh covered both. Then the trapper, by some skillful maneuvering, managed to make a sort of roof with the canoe, and thus a respectable shelter was improvised.

By this time the storm was fairly upon them, the trees were swaying in the blast, and the great oak itself seemed as if it were about to be torn up by the roots and hurled like its own leaves through the air. The rain came driving, almost horizontally, with the fury of a thousand *mitrailleuses*, while an impeneable blackness wrapped earth and sky in its gloomy pall.

What seemed strange, there was scarcely any thunder or lightning. Away off on the borders of the horizon, a few faint flashes were seen, and these were followed by the distant rumble of thunder; but it was only for a few minutes, and of scarcely power to attract notice in the fury of the rain itself.

The swirl of the wind and rain was so great, that for a time, none of the three persons cowering under the shelter of the tree, the canoe, the rock, and their blankets, attempted to exchange a word with each other. Miona shrunk closer to her lover, who pressed her to his side, as if he was never to permit her to leave him again, while Nick stood grim, thoughtful, vigilant, with Calamity crouching behind his feet.

For two hours the storm raged with unabated violence, and then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The fall of rain was suddenly cut short, the wind after a few puffs, died away, and it was all over.

It had scarcely ended, when all three noticed an increasing light in the sky.

"The moon is coming out again," said Mackintosh.

"It's the sun coming up," replied Nick, "day is breaking."

"What a relief after this dreadful darkness," exclaimed Miona; "how glad I am!"

"You'd better be sorry," replied Nick, "that we haven't another night just beginnin'. We ain't ten miles from the lodges, and there's no tellin' how near a dozen of the varmints are to us."

He said no more, but he might have added that there was a conviction upon him that the real danger of the undertaking had just begun, and that a terrible experience was to come upon them in the next few hours.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SIGNAL-FIRES.

The light rapidly increased, and the fugitives were soon able to gain some idea of their situation. They found they were ascending a gradually-sloping ridge, several hundred feet in height, and were yet quite a distance from the top.

Deeming it useless to carry the canoe any further, Nick left it where it had served the purpose of sheltering them, and they resumed their flight without delay. All three were hungry, and had no more food in their possession; but the trapper was desirous of reaching the top of the ridge before halting for breakfast.

Miona felt the need of sustenance, but she was not the one to make her need known in the presence of danger, and she walked along cheerily and bravely, in the same hopeful spirits as her lover, who seemed never weary of looking upon and admiring her beauty. This was the first time he had seen her in the glare of sunlight since the long years ago, when he had met her like a wood-nymph, while visiting his traps in the wood, and he looked upon her with that fond, loving look born of pure, deep affection, and which was returned by her own lustrous eyes.

Her dress was almost entirely Indian in its character, and yet arranged with taste that set off her beauty, perhaps, to greater advantage than a civilized costume would have done.

Although the shadow of a great danger constantly hung over them, yet they forgot it for the time in the pleasure of each other's society, and they chatted, and laughed, and talked of the past, the present and the future, as though there never was to be anything but sunshine, and love, and happiness before them.

"Let 'em talk—let 'em talk!" mused the old trapper, as he occasionally glanced at them; "it would be a condemned pity if I should stop 'em, for there's no tellin' how soon they'll have to hush, anyway. I only wish we had a dozen hours of darkness afore us; I think I could feel easy then."

While communing with himself, he was constantly looking before, behind, and around him, as though in the momentary expectation of some great danger.

"This rain has wiped out our trail," he added, "but it's 'bout sartin that Red Bear knows where we've started fur, and if he ain't close behind us, like 'nough he's on ahead somewhere."

At the end of half an hour they were at the summit of the ridge, and they took the leisure to look about them. Their view to the rear was so extensive that they could trace the creek up which they had ascended for a long distance, on its winding way through the woods. Nick even indicated the point where were the ruins of the Blackfoot village, although the woods at this point were so dense that the view was indistinct and unsatisfactory.

Long and intently the three scanned the interven-

ing stretch of forest and broken country, seeking to catch some glimpse of their enemies, but none were able to discover the first indications of pursuit.

"It ain't no sign they ain't followin' us," remarked Nick, after the failure of their scrutiny, "for the varmints ar' cunnin' and could dodge into cover and watch us all day without our gettin' sight of one of that top-knots."

Turning to the north, a pleasant scene was spread out before them. The ridge sloped away as gradually in that direction as in the other, while about ten miles distant rose another ridge almost precisely similar to the one upon which they were standing. Between these two spread out a low, beautiful valley, through which several streams meandered; the whole country was covered with wood, although it was more scattered in some places than in others, and at certain points the ground was rocky and rugged.

Looking away to the north, the same valley could be traced until wood and stream grew indistinct and mingled with the hazy blue of the horizon.

Crossing the intervening tract of territory—some ten miles in extent, as has been shown—it was necessary for the party to push their way, before they could warrant in enjoying any degree of safety.

"On t'other side that ridge," said Nick, "is the creek that runs into the south branch of the Saskatchewan. If we can once git into my canoe on that without the varmints bein' in front, I'll feel easy."

"Then let us delay no longer," said Miona.

"We've got to have somethin' to eat, or we'll find a condemned diffikilt in travelin'. You see, we ain't goin' to reach t'other side much afore night, and we can't do it on empty stomachs."

"Shall we not be incurring extra danger by kindling a fire in such an elevated position?" asked Mackintosh.

"Yes," was the reply; "we must go fur 'nough down the slope to make sure they won't see us."

They descended entirely to the bottom, where Ned Mackintosh and Miona busied themselves in building a fire, while Nick, cautioning them not to wander away, set out in quest of their breakfast.

The trapper's usual luck did not attend him this time. After hunting for a long time without getting a shot, he lost all patience, and producing the line that he always carried with him, cast it into the nearest stream. Here, in a few minutes, he hauled out several plump fish, which he quickly gathered up and carried back to camp, where his friends were anxiously expecting him.

The fire had been replenished several times, and it required but a few minutes more for the preparation of their morning meal. All were hungry, and when they had finished their repast, it was found that there was none at all left to take away with them against the return of hunger.

But they could well afford to wait twenty-four hours, and Nick declared they must think no more of food until they were out of this dangerous valley, and safe on the other side of the ridge.

"By mighty!" he exclaimed, looking up to the sky; "I don't know where the day has gone, but it's blazed near noon this minute."

It seemed impossible to believe this declaration, but a glance at the sun showed that he was not far from the truth, and the three hurried forward upon their journey, like persons guilty of some great dereliction of duty for which they were anxious to atone.

The ground was found to be very uneven, so that it was impossible to make any sort of progress such as they desired; but they pressed steadily on until the afternoon was well advanced, when an unexpected obstacle presented itself.

While leading the way, Nick Whiffles suddenly found himself upon the bank of a rushing torrent, too broad to leap over, and too deep to think of wading. He paused in amazement for a few seconds, not understanding what it meant, as he had not noticed this stream when standing upon the ridge in the morning; but a moment's reflection told him it was all very natural, being caused by the heavy fall of rain in the night, and which had not time to gather until after the whites were down the slope and into the valley.

What was to be done? was the involuntary question that rose to the lips of all, as they stood on the bank of the rushing, muddy torrent, and felt that some means must be devised for reaching the other side.

"It has risen very suddenly," said Miona: "why can we not wait until it subsides again?"

"It won't do it afore to-morrow," replied Nick; "we must get over somehow or other. If we can't do it here, we must find a spot where we kin."

There was reason to hope that there was some place where this could be accomplished in safety, and the three began searching along the brink for such a point.

This consumed more precious time, and with a feeling of alarm that it would be difficult to depict, they saw the afternoon drawing to a close, while no more than half the distance across the valley was passed.

Finally a projecting rock was discovered, from the edge of which it seemed possible to make the leap.

"I think that'll answer," said Nick, as he carefully measured the distance with his eye. "I've jumped further when I was younger, but the diffikilt, you see, is with the gal."

"Am I the only trouble?" asked Miona.

"That's it—hull-oa!"

As the exclamation escaped the trapper, Miona made a light leap as though she intended to leap into the water, but instead she landed as lightly as a fawn upon the opposite bank, leaving quite a space between where her feet struck and the edge of the stream.

An exclamation of surprise escaped from the two she had left upon the other side, and she looked saucily back and called out:

"Beat that if you can!"

Mackintosh made a slight run and jumped with might and main, his feet striking in the footprints of the girl.

Nick followed, landing a little short.

Calamity looked at his friends a moment, and then turned about, as though he considered such a performance too undignified for him, and then stepping into the torrent began swimming the way over.

The current was so rapid that it was a work of extreme difficulty for him, but he struggled bravely and succeeded in making the other shore, although he was carried quite a distance down-stream.

But the passage was safely made, and all were considerably elated thereat. In searching for this point they had been forced quite a distance upstream and not a little out of their way; but still the long, elevated ridge stretched out across their path, and all they had to do was to reach and pass that. On the other side flowed the stream, which they believed was to bear them into a haven of safety. There were still a goodly number of miles before them, and it was impossible to cross the ridge before night should set in, but if there were no Blackfeet close in their rear, there was reason to hope for a safe deliverance.

They had been over the stream but a few minutes, and were picking their way carefully along, when Calamity showed so much uneasiness that it attracted the attention of all. He whined now and then, and elevating his head snuffed the air in a way which gave him the scent of danger.

Nick Whiffles did not check his speed until they had gone some distance further, when he walked to the top of a rock to make his observation, his two friends following him.

First, he looked to the ridge which they had crossed, and, as he did so, he was seen to start and heard to utter "By mighty!"

Both Mackintosh and Miona gazed in the same direction; but, although both were gifted with a keen eyesight, and both had an extensive experience in woodcraft, they failed to discover the exciting cause of his alarm.

The trapper stood for perhaps three minutes looking intently and unaveringly at the ridge, and then he turned square about and looked the other way.

"By mighty!" was the expression that escaped him, with more emphasis than before, and then he looked back and forth from one ridge to another.

Very naturally his companions began to feel some concern at his manner, and Miona inquired what it meant.

"Look yonder!" he replied, pointing to the ridge on the left, "and tell me whether you see any thing."

"We have been looking in both directions," replied Mackintosh, "and cannot divine what it is."

Nick now indicated the precise point, and added:

"Don't look among the trees, but above 'em."

"Ah! a camp-fire!" exclaimed Ned.

"No; it ain't—it's a signal fire!" corrected Nick.

Just the faintest, dimmest outlines of smoke could be seen rising through the tree-tops on the opposite ridge; and, while carefully scanning it, Ned observed that it did not ascend in a straight line, but that it waved from side to side, in a serpentine manner, showing that the flame which caused it was regularly changed from one spot to another.

"How is that?" inquired Ned, after remarking this peculiar appearance. "I do not understand it."

"I've seen that thing afore," replied Nick, almost sullenly; "one of the varmints is in the top of the tree with a torch in his hand. Now, take a look at t'other side."

This was done, and precisely the same thing was seen upon the summit of that.

"There must be an Indian in one of those trees, too?"

"Yes; and a whole pack of 'em at the bottom, too; they've been watchin' us all the afternoon and signaling to each other. They know just where we are this minute, and they're putting things in shape to gobble us."

Nick seemed in a more despondent mood than either of his companions had noticed since starting, and they naturally partook of his mental depression.

He chafed at the remembrance of his delay in getting across this ten-mile valley. Here the better part of the day had been spent in wandering about in full view of their enemies, and there was no possibility now of deceiving them as to their movements.

They could only wait until darkness closed about them, and then attempt to steal over the ridge without being discovered. There was a possibility of this, but Nick Whiffles was satisfied in his own mind that Red Bear and others were closer to them than his companions suspected.

The infuriated Blackfoot had not concluded to wait until night, but was doubtless stealing through the wood after them.

What meant the uneasiness of Calamity, but that danger was close at hand? Remarkable as was the sagacity of the canine, his master knew that he had not seen, or having seen, did not understand the meaning of signal-fires in the distance.

There was something else that alarmed him. It was in the woods, close about them.

"What is it, pup?" asked Nick, as he retreated from his exposed position upon the rock; "do you smell varmints?"

There was nothing particularly noticeable in his reply, but it was of such a character that his master

grasped his rifle more firmly, and said in a low tone to Mackintosh:

"Be ready for the varmints any minute."

"I am ready," replied Ned, feeling in his breast-pocket to make sure his revolver was there. "It is getting dark, and if we can keep out of their way until night, I have hopes of giving them the slip."

"If we hadn't got hindered so in crossin' this blamed place, there'd be a better chance for us, but it's going to be the condemnedest diffikility we ever was in afore."

Nick Whiffles did not forget that his companions had not slept a wink upon the preceding night, unless they might have snatched a few minutes when in the canoe, and he had the strongest doubts of their ability to stand the strain to which they would be subjected through the coming darkness.

But there was a present danger which now required all his thoughts, and he led his friends stealthily and slowly through the wood, so as to escape the observation of any who were stationed on an elevated look-out.

Suddenly Calamity gave such unmistakable evidence of uneasiness that all paused, feeling that the danger was so close at hand that there was no need of attempting to proceed further.

CHAPTER XIII. PURSUED BY SHADOWS.

Nick Whiffles stood with gun grasped in both hands, ready to fire at an instant's warning, while Ned Mackintosh held almost precisely the same position directly in the rear of him, the affrighted Miona, pale, motionless and almost breathless at his side.

A dozen feet in advance crouched Calamity, growling and bristling with anger, the only member of the party who was making the least sound.

"Sh! pup!" admonished the trapper; "there's no need of making a noise, but keep your head p'inted toward the varmints."

The dog quieted down, but his appearance showed that he was angered at something that was rapidly approaching, and that at the same time, he was agitated by an undefined fear, such as Mackintosh had never seen him show before.

This painful state of suspense was ended suddenly and unexpectedly by the appearance of an enormous grizzly bear that came awkwardly shuffling through the woods directly toward them!

As quick as thought Mackintosh brought his rifle to his shoulder, but ere he could sight it at the approaching monster, Nick furiously gesticulated, and called out in an excited undertone:

"Don't you do it!"

There was no disregarding that command, even though the king of the woods was almost upon them. Catching the arm of Miona, the two walked rapidly backward, he holding his gun so as to use it effectively, while he kept his eye fixed upon the brute, coming straight at them.

As Calamity was exactly in the path of the bear, his sagacity taught him that the only thing for him to do was to get out of it without attempting to dispute the right of way with this king of the western wilds. So, wheeling about, he scurried behind his master, still snarling and growling and ready to mangle in the fray, as soon as an opportunity offered.

It was a trying moment. Nothing but absolute, undeniably necessity could induce Nick to fire, for he knew that the crack of a rifle would be sure to guide the Blackfeet to the very spot where they were standing.

Instead of firing, therefore, he threw up both hands and sprung directly toward the bear, uttering a suppressed exclamation as he did so. The bear uttered a snuff of terror and then shied off to the left, and at a faster gait than ever galloped away in the woods.

"Now, come," called out Nick, plunging into the forest and taking a course at right angles; "the varmints ain't fur off."

With that sharpness of perception, which was almost intuitive with the trapper, he comprehended from the action of the grizzly bear, the instant he came in sight, that he was fleeing before the Indians, who had roused or unexpectedly come across him in the woods.

The brute made no attempt to disturb either Calamity or his friends, and his advance upon them was merely because they happened to be in his path, shying away the moment Nick added to his terror by shooting in his face.

The Blackfeet were so close that the crack of a rifle would have brought them to the spot ere they could have fled, and hence the prompt, imperative manner in which Nick Whiffles checked the shot that was almost discharged from the gun of Ned Mackintosh.

By this time the sun had set, and the gloom of twilight was already in the wood. Every moment was growing more favorable to the whites, and with something like a renewal of hope, they hurried through the shadowy forest.

Calamity gave no sign of apprehension, but glided deftly through the undergrowth, keeping a good lead of the others, and comprehending very well the direction his master wished him to pursue.

Suddenly the sharp and near crack of a rifle rung among the trees, and confident that one of their number had been struck, Mackintosh turned with a gasp of alarm toward the trapper, expecting to see him stagger to the ground; but all that he did was to change the course he had been pursuing, and commence reloading his rifle.

At the same instant the grasp of Miona upon the arm of her lover was spasmodically tightened, and as he glanced inquiringly toward her, she pointed ahead and aspirated:

"LOO!"

In the deepening gloom of the wood Mackintosh saw the figure of a man with arms thrown up, falling backward. He was barely able to discern that it was that of an Indian, when their hurrying steps carried them out of his sight.

It was Nick Whiffles, then, who had fired the gun, and so truly was it aimed, that the unerring bullet drove the life from the body ere he could give utterance to the death-yell, which almost invariably distinguishes the death of the Indian of this country.

"There are others near!" whispered Miona, as they sped away.

Deeper grew the gathering gloom, and the lovers could scarcely keep pace with the hurrying Nick Whiffles, who saw that all depended upon keeping out of sight of the Blackfeet until it was impossible for them to detect their trail, or to see them at any considerable distance in the wood.

Aware of the value of time, the red-skins were pushing their search with the utmost vigor, avoiding any outcry or signaling for fear of giving them the alarm.

The course of the trapper was as zigzag as the track of the lightning across the sky. He turned until the athletic Mackintosh began to feel exhausted. They were barely able to see the lank form of Nick as he sped along, and he looked like some shadowy fugitive that they were vainly pursuing instead of their own leader.

All at once he came to a halt, and, turning upon them, demanded:

"Be you tired?"
Their panting breath answered his question without their saying anything more.

"By mighty! we've had a sharp run for it!" he exclaimed, breathing somewhat more rapidly himself.

"But will it do to wait here?" asked the trembling Miona.

"Yes; they're off the track now, and by goin' ahead we'd be as likely to butt into 'em as not—while if we stay here we, kin git a rest, that I rather think you folks need."

Need it they did, and were glad enough to get it, both sitting down upon the ground, while the old trapper folded his arms over the muzzle of his upright rifle, and seemed lost in reverie, while Calamity crouched at his feet panting, but as keenly vigilant as ever.

The woods were still—no sound betraying the proximity of their dreaded foes. Where they were, and what they were doing, could only be imagined, but there could be no doubt that they were on the alert somewhere, watchful for the first indication of the hiding-place of the fugitives.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed, and a faint tremolo-like whistle was heard, so soft and musical in its character, that Mackintosh could not tell whether it was in the air overhead, or beneath, or beside them.

A moment after the sound was repeated, apparently from the same spot, but Nick Whiffles read both signals aright. The first came from a point several hundred yards to the north, and the other almost the same distance west.

Had the latter been south instead of west, it would have shown that the whites were directly between the two parties giving utterance to them, and that they were closing down upon them; but, coming from the points mentioned, it proved that the Blackfeet had no certain means of guidance and were "feeling" for their prey.

Had Nick Whiffles been alone he would have indulged his characteristic humor, by answering both of these signals, and equally misleading both. He had done so many a time when alone on the war-path, and he was strongly tempted to do so now.

It was only his regard for the safety of the two dear friends under his charge that induced him to forego this little piece of amusement, and to give his whole energies to keeping them out of danger.

The whites now made a slight change in their position, passing deeper into the wood, where the trees were more dense, but, as they immediately discovered, they were beside a sort of path, such as are made by animals going to and fro to water. They fell into this path without noticing it until they had gone some distance, when Nick immediately left it.

"How long are we to wait here?" inquired Mackintosh.

"Till we git some idea of where the varmints are," replied the trapper. "We must git out of this condemned valley afore morning, or we'll never git out of it."

His plan was to wait where they were until they could advance with a tolerable certainty of not running into great danger.

Their movements and turnings up to this time had been guided solely with the purpose of keeping out of immediate danger only. When the red-skins were endeavoring to close about them, the utmost they could do was to keep slipping out of their grasp, until time could be gained for some plan of escape altogether.

The report of Nick Whiffles's rifle narrowed the struggle down to an exceedingly narrow point. The Blackfeet, scattered here and there through the woods, instantly converged toward the point, just in time to find their dead comrade, and to miss finding who had been the means of his taking off.

For several minutes succeeding the signals mentioned nothing was heard except the distant sound of the torrent and the rustle of the night-wind through the leaves overhead.

Then, all at once, the same whistle reached their ears, sounding so close that even Nick Whiffles himself started. Seemingly guided by fate, the Indians, without any certain knowledge themselves of the fact, were drawing nearer and nearer to the party each minute.

Nick stepped softly forward, and whispered to Miona to stand behind the tree closest to her, Mackintosh did the same, and then, as the trapper took his position he whispered:

"Don't stir or speak till I give the word."

Calamity at this juncture, gave utterance to an almost inaudible whine.

"Sh! pup!" said his master, and all was still again, the dog retreating to the denser cover of the wood.

This had hardly taken place when a slight rustling was heard, and the outlines of a huge Indian were discerned walking stealthily along the path. He seemed really a shadow, so silently did he move, and so swift were his footsteps that he was in view only a minute, when he slid into invisibility, and a second later another form came to view.

Nick Whiffles was the closest to the path, and he recognized this individual despite the darkness. The peculiar head-dress, which he sported, marked him as the prime mover in this mischief. He was the young chieftain, Red Bear, seeking so determinedly for his bride, who was seeking with equal determination to get beyond his power.

Miona thought the beating of her heart would betray her, when this second form stopped almost opposite her.

Could it be that his acute ear heard the tumultuous throbbing of her heart? Had some slight rustling of her dress, inaudible to herself, caught his attention? Did the magnetic consciousness of her presence make itself known to him, as we are warned of the proximity of another person, when our senses fail to acquaint us with the fact?

She felt as if she would sink to the ground, when she made certain that the red-skin had halted so near her. It seemed to her that all was over, and despair took the place of hope that had been cheering her on.

Still she sustained herself from falling, and hardly allowed herself to breathe. Pressing her hand to her heart, as if to still its beating, she uttered her prayer that the danger might pass by her.

In this extremely delicate situation matters stood, when Red Bear, without moving a limb, gave out the same tremulous-like whistle that had already been heard several times, repeating it twice, with a slight interval.

Alarming as was the sound, it was cheerful under the present circumstances, for it proved that Red Bear was really unaware of his neighbors, and Miona accepted it as such, scarcely able to repress a sigh of relief.

The signal was answered by some one further up the path, and then Red Bear moved on, followed by another and another, until nine Indians had filed by, all moving so close that Nick Whiffles could have tripped any or all of them, by merely thrusting out his foot.

For several minutes after the last had passed, none of the party moved. Then the trapper stepped out in the path, as a signal that the others might do the same. His action was speedily imitated, and they began moving forward again, taking a course directly opposite to that pursued by the Indians.

As there was a possibility, if not a probability of encountering some more of the red-skins, Calamity took up his old position of *avant courier* for his friends, maintaining such a relative position that he could easily give them warning in time for them to dart aside again from the path.

The lovers very naturally had lost their reckoning entirely, but Nick Whiffles knew that the path they were following led almost parallel to the two ridges between which they were placed, so that as long as it was followed they were really making little or no advancement toward their real destination.

But his present purpose, as it had been for some hours past, was to get beyond the immediate vicinity of the Indians, so as to obtain some freedom of movement. As the path afforded them the opportunity to move much more rapidly than through the broken wood, and at the same time was less liable to cause a betrayal of their presence by the noise of brushing limbs and breaking twigs, he availed himself, so far as was possible, of these advantages, and pressed forward with something like his old haste.

In the constant hurry and excitement of their situation, Ned Mackintosh scarcely found time to exchange a word with the trembling, affrighted Miona, who kept as close to him as the nature of the ground would permit; but now and then he managed to whisper a word of encouragement, and to press the little hand that rested so confidently in his own.

It was scarcely the time for sentimentality or for any expression of love; but the peril which hung over all seemed to bring the two in close unison, and my hero felt that he would be glad to face any danger that would attest and prove his devotion to her.

The skill and sagacity of Nick Whiffles, favored by Providence, had sufficed to bring them through a labyrinth of peril, but they were yet in the gravest danger.

How much longer could a collision be postponed? Was there a possibility of reaching and passing over the ridge, without a deadly encounter with the Blackfeet? While they had hoped that there were no more than three or four in pursuit of them, there was now every reason to believe that there were over a dozen fully-armed and vigilant red-skins following them like bloodhounds.

Where would the morrow find them? Even if on the other side of the slope, would their safety be anyways increased? Would they not be followed with the same unrelenting ferocity?

Such were the thoughts that were in the head of Ned Mackintosh, when a sudden stoppage of Nick Whiffles and his suppressed "sh!" warned them that they were in the presence of a new and startling danger!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SLEEPING SCOUT.

ADVANCING a few steps nearer to Nick Whiffles, the lovers saw what was now the cause of the alarm. Directly ahead of them, and seemingly in the path itself, they plainly saw the gleam of a camp-fire.

It was plain that the trapper was somewhat puzzled over this. Certain at once that there was some deep design in it, he was at a loss to comprehend what the design was. Common opinion would have pronounced this to be the regular camp-fire of the Blackfeet, but even Mackintosh knew that such a thing was extremely improbable; for the Indians were not in camp, and would not kindle a fire in the vicinity of an enemy, unless it was intended to be used as some means to decoy them into destruction.

So the party paused for a few minutes, while Nick cautiously approached to reconnoiter. He went nearer and nearer until no more than a hundred feet separated him from it, and prudence warned him against going further.

He then saw that the fire was burning directly in the path, but there was no sign of any person near; but, satisfied that there must be some one, he waited and watched. Something like a half-hour had passed, and the fire was sensibly diminishing, when an Indian suddenly came to view out of the darkness, and throwing quite a large quantity of sticks and brush upon the flames, retreated to the shelter of the forest again. Nick waited and watched, expecting to see others, but none at all were visible, and it was evident that this was the only Blackfoot in the immediate vicinity.

With his remarkable sagacity, Nick now began to comprehend what all this meant. The Blackfeet were taking pains to keep the fire burning, expecting that it would, perhaps catch the eye of the fugitives wandering in the vicinity. They would be apt naturally to drift into the path, and seeing the fire would make a *detour* to avoid it. On each side of the fire, at some distance in the wood, there were doubtless Indian sentinels on the alert to discover, and instantly make known their whereabouts to the Indians searching for them.

This was Nick's theory of what he saw, although at the same time, he saw that it was no very brilliant strategy, and the chances of its success were quite remote; but it had its danger, nevertheless, and he turned back to warn his companions.

The natural course that now suggested itself was for the party to leave the path altogether, and pursue a course at right angles to it, make directly for the ridge over which they were so desirous of passing.

This was done with only a moment's delay, necessary for a complete understanding of the movement. The Indians seemed still on every side of them, and too much caution could not be exercised in every movement made. The keenness of Calamity was invaluable, and he had already been the means of saving them from capture more than once.

"We're in a condemned diffikilt yet," remarked Nick, as they stepped out of the path; "it's hard traveling over these rocks, and if you ain't blamed careful, the varmints'll hear you, too."

"You mustn't go too fast," admonished Miona; "two or three times I came near losing you."

"I'll take care of that," was the reply. "Are you good for a long tramp?"

"I am good for any exertion that will get us out of this dangerous place," she answered; "it seems that we are making no progress at all."

"We ain't much, sartin. How do you stand it, Ned? Are you 'bout ready to give up?"

"I will notify you, Nick, when I need rest," laughed Ned. "I am somewhat tired, but my only trouble is drowsiness. You know I haven't slept for two nights, and if I stand still for ten minutes, I find my eyes getting heavy."

"You must fight it off, for we ain't going to have any time to sleep to-night. Wait till you get where there's a chance, and you may sleep for a week. Come ahead now, and mind what I said 'bout making a noise; it seems to me that's a hundred of the varmints skulking all round us."

Again they moved forward, taking a route that was much more difficult to follow than the other. Here and there the woods were so full of dense undergrowth that they were forced to pick their way with great carefulness, or else to change their course entirely; then again huge rocks interposed, causing the same difficulty; but the trapper still maintained his general direction, advancing closer and closer to the ridge on the north-east of them.

The sky was clear, and while they were passing along in this manner, the moon appeared above the ridge behind them, casting a dim light over the forest, and helping them on their way at the same time that it also increased the danger of their being seen by the Indians, who were leaving no stone unturned to detect and capture them.

Occasionally Whiffles paused and listened, while Calamity was never more alert and keen-scented. So long as he gave no signs of disturbance a certain feeling of security was with all; it was only when he showed uneasiness that the lovers apprehended serious trouble.

No little progress was made in this direction, and the reaction of hope was strong with all, when, as if to remind them they were doomed beyond all question, Nick Whiffles exclaimed:

"By mighty! if we ain't runnin' afoul of another of their infernal camp-fires; do you observe that?"

As he spoke he pointed into the wood, where the well known glimmer was distinguishable directly ahead of them, and in such a position that had they continued their progress they could not have saved themselves from running directly into it.

Again the veteran trapper was nonplussed. Why

this second camp-fire should be kindled was a puzzle to him, as there was no reason certainly for the Blackfeet to think that they were going to run against it. It might be, however, that there were a dozen camp-fires burning here and there through the valley, and this was only a part of a plan that was intended to prevent the possibility of their escaping from the valley.

The first question of course was what was to be done, and Nick answered it by proposing a different course of procedure.

"Ned, you haven't forgot the way you used to steal through the woods—I can see that, the way you've managed since you've been with me—so I'm going to let you ruckynoiter that on one side, while I take the other."

"And I am to approach it from the front, I suppose," said Miona, with a laugh.

"I want you to stay exactly where you are till we come back to you," was the reply.

"Here is my blanket," said Mackintosh, adjusting it about her shoulders; "you can wrap it about you, and, as you must be quite drowsy, you can obtain the much-needed slumber."

"You are sure you will know where to find me?" remarked the girl, doubtfully, to Nick.

"You needn't think nothin' of that: all you've got to do is, to cuddle down with the blanket about you, say your prayers, and go to sleep."

Mackintosh kissed her good-by, and, with a fond word or two, the men moved away.

"Now," said my hero, "I want to understand precisely what is expected of me."

"Wal, then, I want you to go within 'bout a hundred feet of that fire, on your right, an' I'll go the same on the left, and we'll keep on till we meet on other side."

"Suppose we miss each other, shall we take our old style of whistle? I think I haven't forgotten to make that."

"We mustn't lose each other, Ned."

"But the thing is possible, Nick, and a wise general prepares for all known contingencies before going into battle."

"There mustn't be any whistling or signaling between us at all. If you get off the track, I'll set the pup to huntin' you, and I think he'll scent you out, if you climb a tree."

"Ah! I forgot Calamity," replied Ned, as he stooped and patted the head of the faithful brute. "What would we do, if it wasn't for him? All right, then. I think I understand my part."

A few more words were exchanged, that the two might make sure that they understood each other, and then they separated. Nick Whiffles thus doing what all military science would condemn, dividing his force in the face of an enemy; but, under the circumstances, he was justified in his strategy, as the efficient part of his company were merely thrown forward as "skirmishers," and with the purpose of feeling the foe.

Nick, I may as well remark, completed his part of the reconnaissance, as a matter of course, without difficulty, but a most singular experience was that of Ned Mackintosh, as I shall now proceed to show.

The training of five years before could never be eradicated from the young man, and with something like amusement, he saw himself moving forward with the caution, stealth and celerity of a veteran scout.

He constantly glanced toward the camp-fire; and, as he advanced further and further, he became aware that it was not a "dummy," like the one he had passed some time before, but that there were men near it. He could see figures occasionally moving between him and the blaze, which flamed up irregularly, as though it was being fed by those around it.

Such being the case, Mackintosh felt that it was his duty to make a closer inspection of the party. His position might be such as to give him a better opportunity than Nick, and he decided upon making as close an approach to the fire as was possible.

Following the custom of scouts at such times, he sunk down on his hands and knees, and began creeping stealthily forward.

There was a sort of fascination in this, as he remembered to have felt when a boy, while he was stealing upon some game, and he drew nearer and nearer, until prudence warned him that it would not do to go any further, and he paused.

He was now lying flat upon his face, his eyes fixed keenly upon the blaze, watching the figures that occasionally flitted to view, intent only upon learning what he could learn, when he became sensible of the old feeling of drowsiness creeping upon him.

What should he do? Regular as he had been in his habits, it was impossible for him to fight off the insidious approach of the "restorer," which never seemed so sweet, so balmy, so tempting as then.

"Shall I retreat, and move about until I gain command of myself?" he asked, as he debated the danger in his own mind.

Then he concluded that if he went further away from the camp-fire, he would put himself in a position where he could learn nothing at all regarding the Indians, and his reconnaissance would then be a failure altogether.

By this time, Mackintosh was in that reckless state of mind, which immediately precedes slumber, and in which he cares very little how wags the world, and is only anxious that his slumbers be not disturbed.

Two minutes later, as he lay stretched out upon the ground, he was sound asleep.

Fortunately for Ned Mackintosh, his position was such that he breathed freely and easily, so that there was no danger of his presence being betrayed by that means alone.

He was so close to the camp-fire, that it only need-

ed to throw its rays somewhat further to strike his prostrate and unconscious form, for he was as oblivious of his danger, as though he were across the ocean, thousands of miles away.

Again and again was the fire replenished, and it flamed higher and higher, but still he slept on. A half dozen or more of Indians were coming and going before the camp-fire; they occasionally grouped together, but they remained unmindful of the proximity of one of the very men for whom they were searching.

Occasionally the tremolo-like whistle was heard in the stillness of the night, and the replies came from different parts of the wood, but where or whether the revengeful Blackfeet passed, they failed to discover their victims.

But this state of things could not continue for any length of time. One of the keen Blackfeet left the camp-fire and wandered off in the very direction where Mackintosh was lying, halting about a dozen yards away, where he stood like one uncertain in what direction he should turn his steps.

At this juncture, the sleeper moved uneasily in his slumber, throwing his arms from off his face. Slight as was the noise, it caught the ear of the red-skin, who started and glanced furtively in the direction, as if he suspected danger.

In the gloom of the wood he discerned nothing, but he carefully withdrew further into the darkness, where he was better protected himself, and then began circling around the point whence issued the suspicious sound.

Again the arm of the sleeper struck the dry leaves, and the Blackfoot was able to tell precisely where the noise occurred.

Something certainly was there that needed investigation, and he crouched down like a panther and began circling around it.

Step by step he drew near, until at length he was enabled to detect the figure of a man stretched out upon the ground.

"What could it mean?" the Indian instinctively asked himself, pausing and gazing at the form, doubtful whether it was that of a dead or dying man.

As the savage was now situated, the latter was between him and the fire, so that he could see any movement made by the stranger, and while he was looking at him, he saw a foot stir.

This proved at once that the man was alive, and the indifferent way in which he stirred it, proved at once that he was not wounded.

The Indian had already discovered that he was a white man, and consequently one of the very party for whom they were searching, and he comprehended at once that he must be asleep.

What a fortunate thing for the Blackfoot.

His heart gave a leap of exultation at the thought. While the other dozen or more were searching here, there, everywhere for the whites, here was one directly in his power.

It was very easy to summon his comrades around him, to secure the poor fellow at once, but why do that?

Was he not abundantly able to take care of himself? Ay, though he were aroused and fully armed, the Blackfoot would have sprung forward, eager to meet him in the hand-to-hand encounter.

So, drawing his knife, he crept on toward him. He was determined that the glory of his scalp should belong to him alone. He would carry it into camp and glory over it, in the face of the other braves.

Only a few feet separated them, and the knife was in the hand of the Indian, who was now certain of his prey.

And still Ned Mackintosh slumbered!

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT NEXT?

"ANOTHER condemned diffikilt," muttered Nick Whiffles, as, after thoroughly reconnoitering the camp, and crawling two-thirds of the way around it, he failed to discover any sign of Ned Mackintosh; "either me or him has got off the track. I'm sure it ain't me."

Still not suspecting that any thing serious had occurred, Nick waited where he was, expecting that his young friend would speedily put in an appearance.

"There allers seems to be some diffikilt that a man's gettin' into," he continued, talking partly to himself and partly to Calamity, who was crouched down beside him. "The very first time I come across that younger, he was in the greatest diffikilt of his life, fur when a baby two or three years old starts out in a canoe, he needn't ca'c late on having an easy time of it."

"I s'pose I had a good deal of the same diffikilt when I was young; for I've heard my mother say I had all the diseases ever heard of, and some new ones that was never heard of. I was so short when I got the fever that it hadn't room to turn in me. The doctor that tended me was a fit-doctor, and he didn't know nothing 'bout anything else; so he allers made it a pint that I should be scared into fits afore he'd have anything to do with me, 'cause he said he was death on fits, and it was necessary I should go into 'em afore his medicines would do me any good."

"But I paid the old scamp off by giving him the whooping-cough, and it took such a hold of him that he coughed for six days without stopping, and then had a screw put on the top of his head to keep it on, but the thread didn't hold and that was the end of his career as a fit-doctor."

"Howsumever I got well myself, and a few days arter fell out the third-story winder; but I struck on the head of a colored gentleman that was passing. He had a new hat on, and it jammed it down over his eyes, so there was another diffikilt, es my old gentleman had to pay for that."

"Then the first time I went out swimming, I got caught in the current, went through the gates, and got under the wheel. I was purty tough in them days, and instead of getting mashed, I only got purty well squeezed; but it stopped the water-wheel, and took 'em a half-hour to get me out, and my father had to pay the men for the half hour lost time."

"When I went to school, the teacher said I had an amazin' talent, but it was a talent for making fires—and that's what he set me at; but the second time that I undertook it, the stove upset and set fire and burned down the building. Nobody ever found it out, howsoever, as no one besides me see'd it except the teacher, and he got burned up afore he could git out."

"So I got out of that diffikilty very handsome, but only to tumble into another, fur when I was in St. Louis, some thief in the crowd finding himself hard chased, took the money out the pocket-book and slipped the pocket-book in my pocket, and then grabbed me by the collar, and yelled, *'stop thief!'*

"That and some other things disgusted me with the settlements, and I struck out for the peraries and mountains."

"I was young in them days, and I hadn't been out here long afore I fell in love with a beautiful squaw, and spent a year in courtin' her from a distance, and then when I got a chance to come nearer, I see'd she was a big warrior, that slammed his tomahawk at my head, and that I had to soothe by lettin' daylight through his skull."

"Every man must have his diffikilities, I s'pose. Here is Ned come all the way across the ocean, to get the gal he loves and loves him, all 'cause there was a diffikility that wouldn't let 'em take her away with the rest of the family, and now when he comes all the way arter her, here's the condemnedest diffikility of all; we've got the critter, but here the varmints are all about us, and there's no tellin' when we're goin' to get her clear away."

"I send Ned out to make a rackingoissance and he agrees to meet me, and he don't do it—some little condemned diffikility is in the way; he's run outside of me, which, howsoever, is better than runnin' inside, and we've got to crawl around here in the dark for a good while afore we run afoul of each other."

"Thar's allers some diffikility fur a man to stumble over, or to stop him, but I s'pose if there wasn't he'd get to runnin' so fast that there'd be no stoppin' to him."

It was very evident from Nick's manner that he was not alarmed at the absence of his friend. He supposed that it had all resulted very naturally, and that they would soon find each other.

Nick was quite sleepy, too, but he was also so much accustomed to self-denial and privation that he easily staved off his creeping drowsiness. He was so far away from the fire that none of its light could possibly strike him, although he could plainly see the moving figures near it.

Calamity still crouched at his side, and the trapper affectionately laid his arm over his neck, as a lover would have done.

"I orter be kicked to be talkin' 'bout diffikilities, when God has been so clever to me, and what animal is there that He ain't a blamed sight kinder to than he deserves? All through my diffikilities He has took care of me: I'm healthy ('specially at feedin' time), and the pup here still sticks by me."

"Then there's Shagbark at home—one of the smartest animals that ever kicked a varmint over. Shagbark hain't had much of a hand in gettin' the gal out of the power of the varmints, 'cause we've had to use our canoes; but he's home gettin' fat, and will be ready to take the next trail with me. Me and Shagbark have seen some hard times together, and I've found his heels a purty handy thing when the reds kin down on us rather too heavy."

The fact of it was that, although Nick Whiffles was disposed to talk very much of his diffikilities, he did not intend to do so in a complaining sense, but rather for his own amusement. He could not help feeling that he was under the greatest obligations to the Providence that had brought him through so many dangers to see his advanced age.

About this time Nick began to feel so much apprehension regarding his friend that he turned back and resumed his search.

"It may be that he's finished his rackingoissance, and has gone back to court that gal," he muttered, believing such a thing possible, but hardly probable.

So he went over most of the ground that he had already trod over, taking a sort of zigzag course, but still without accomplishing any thing toward finding his man.

So much time had now passed that he began to feel serious alarm, and finally he made the last resort.

"Calamity, I'm a little uneasy 'bout the lad; do you go and hunt for me."

The dog at once trotted off in the darkness, fully sensible of the duty that was required of him.

Back and forth and around he went, until finally he struck the scent, and he followed it as if he were a bloodhound.

The Indian that was stealing upon the sleeping figure of Ned Mackintosh had already drawn his knife, and had decided where to drive it home, when a slight rustling behind him caused him to turn his head.

As he did so, a huge dark body, like a cannon-ball on the ricochet, struck him with such velocity as to throw him over and over, while the fangs of Calamity were fixed with such immovable fierceness in his throat that the red-skin, after a few spasmodic struggles, stretched out, dead.

It was all done with inconceivable quickness. The almost human foresight of the dog seemed to tell him that his human enemy would bury the gleam-

ing knife in his body if only the opportunity was given, and so he crushed the life out of him at once and completely.

There was no outcry, but the flinging of the leaves so close to the head of Mackintosh aroused him, and he rose to a sitting position just as Calamity released his iron jaws from the throat of the Indian.

One glance and the young man understood all. He saw that the dog had rescued him from death—a fate incurred by his own remissness—and he impulsively threw his arms about the animal.

"God be thanked for sending you in time!" he exclaimed; "but for you I would not have been a living man this minute."

How came Calamity to be upon the spot at this opportune time?

A moment's reflection served to explain it to him. He had doubtless been sleeping on the ground for a long time, until the wearied Nick had sent Calamity to search for him.

"I am sorry I forgot myself, and gave the trapper all this anxiety," reflected Mackintosh, as he began cautiously retreating from his dangerous position; "but at the same time I am very glad I have been able to secure a good hour or two of slumber, for I needed it bad enough, and might have taken it at a time when it would have put the rest in more danger."

As he had no idea of the proper course to take to reach Nick Whiffles, he put himself under the guidance of Calamity, who, as a matter of course, speedily brought the men together. Ned confessed to his falling asleep, and explained how the dog had discovered him just in time to save his life from the ferocious Blackfoot.

"The pup done the same thing for me once," replied Nick, who took it all as a matter of course; "it's just like him, just like him."

"What are you going to do when he dies?" asked Ned, looking admiringly at the brute. "I shouldn't consider myself safe a day leading your life without him."

"I got him at the Selkirk settlement eight years ago, and I think he's good for several seasons yet; 'he's got plenty relatives there, and I'll hunt 'em out when he keels over, and take some of his nephews or descendants."

"You will keep him till he pegs out with old age?"

"Unless he goes under afore; I expect, howsoever, that Calamity will be my dog when I git to heaven, for you can't make me believe that *such* dogs hasn't got souls like the rest of us."

Mackintosh had no wish to disturb the pleasant belief of the trapper, and so he let his assertion pass undisputed.

"How long do you suppose I have been sleeping?" he inquired.

"Well on to two hours; that is, if you dropped asleep purty soon after you left here."

"That I did, and it has done me good; I sorely needed it."

"What did you larn 'bout the Injins?"

"Well, not much of anything, except that there are about a dozen hanging around the camp-fire—for what purpose I cannot imagine, and therefore cannot tell whether the indications are favorable or not."

"The sign is rather good," added Nick; "this is a sort of a camp, and ain't any trap set to catch us; we can pass around it without runnin' ag'in a lot of the varmints at every step."

"Have you met with no adventure while I was sleeping?"

"None."

"You consider our chances pretty good for getting out of the valley now?"

"Better than they war; you see, the varmints are off the track altogether, and don't know whar to look for us."

"One of the signal-fires that we saw, you recollect was on the top of the very ridge over which we are to pass; consequently we may look for our enemies there."

"We may look for 'em everywhere," replied Nick; "'that Red Bear isn't goin' to give up the chase so long as there is a show for 'em.'

"I suppose Miona is looking for us."

"Yes; and time is precious, so we'll walk and talk."

The two men were so far away from the camp that they considered it safe to engage in a cautious conversation, without risk of being overheard by their enemies. At the same time neither was so reckless as to forget that there was danger all around, and that a misstep even might betray them.

Nick Whiffles was quite hopeful again. He and the others had been so hotly pursued, and were driven to the wall, as it were, so often, that there was a relief in the respite, which they now enjoyed.

Circling around so as to give the camp of the Blackfeet a wide birth, they rapidly approached the spot where they had left Miona.

They walked along some time in silence, and then Ned looked about him, and said: "I can't see very well, but this looks like the spot."

"It is the spot."

"But where is Miona?"

"That is what I should like to know. She isn't here, that's certain."

The two walked carefully about for a few minutes, and then Ned asked his companion:

"Are you really certain this is the place where she was to await our return? I didn't notice it particularly enough to tell."

"It's the spot, sartin: there's no mistake about it."

"Merciful heavens! then she is gone!"

"It looks very much that way," was the answer of Nick Whiffles, who was standing in the shadow of the wood, with his arms folded and resting upon his rifle.

This was his attitude when in deep, perplexing thought, as he certainly was on the present occasion.

Ned Mackintosh waited a few minutes for him to speak, and then growing impatient, asked:

"Where can she be, Nick? Do not say she is in the hands of the Blackfeet, or you will drive me wild."

"I don't say where she is," was the impressive reply of the trapper. "I don't know whether she's dead or livin', but I think the varmints have got her, and if they have you may make sartin that you'll never see her again!"

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE TOILS.

LITTLE did Nick Whiffles and Ned Mackintosh dream of the experiences to which Miona was doomed, when they left her in the wood.

Her position seemed so secure against discovery by the Blackfeet, that even the veteran trapper deemed it perfectly safe so long as the darkness lasted.

The girl resolved to obey the instruction of her old friend to the letter, and drawing the blanket close around her, she sat down at the foot of the tree, under which she had been standing, and almost instantly sunk into a profound slumber, for she instantly rested as much as did her lover.

But her nerves were in a more excitable condition, for the shadow of her great danger was upon her, and after she had slept about an hour she suddenly awoke to a full consciousness of her situation.

At the same moment she was conscious of a feeling of peril such as she had not had when first left alone. It was a sort of presentiment of danger that was so impressive, that, despite the warning she had received from Nick, she determined to change her position by withdrawing somewhat further into the wood.

She stepped back a dozen paces or so, when she found herself beside a tree, similar to that which she had just left. Here she stood motionless and listened.

Was that the rustling of the wind that just then caught her ear? No, it was upon the ground, and while she was trying to still the beating of her heart, she distinctly heard the tread of some one upon the leaves!

Some wild animal, she concluded, was wandering near her, unconscious of her presence.

"I will not stir, and he will pass by," she thought, as she endeavored to pierce the inky gloom about her.

But no; it was drawing near, and it was moving so stealthily that she was certain her presence was detected, and it intended to steal upon her.

Filled with alarm, Miona reached her hands upward to seek if there were any limbs upon which she could seize and draw herself up out of its reach.

No; there were none, and the creature was now within a few paces!

What should she do?

She had no weapons at all with her, she had left the deserted village in such haste that she had not once thought of bringing her rifle with her. She was helpless.

Then came the hope that she might frighten the animal into leaving her, and summoning her courage to the intense trial, she made a light spring toward it in the darkness, throwing up her outstretched arms, as she had seen Nick do with the bear, and shaking her blanket at the same time, and uttering an aspiration intended to startle the creature, whatever it was.

As she did so, she felt her arm gripped in such a manner that she knew at once that an Indian had seized it!

With a gasp of terror, Miona attempted to draw back and wrench herself free; but a giant could not have held her more securely.

"Heaven be merciful!" she prayed, struggling with the strength of desperation.

"Miona! my Queen!"

She recognized that voice; it belonged to Red Bear!

Ay; the very being most dreaded upon earth had her now in his power!

Miona would have screamed, but her tongue seemed palsied; she attempted to speak, but could not! She was like one dead.

"My Queen of the Woods!" added Red Bear, in his native tongue. "I have sought you long, and with tears in my eyes; why did you flee from me?"

Her speech came back to her, but what should she say? What reply could she make? What reason could she give? What was to be gained by attempting to bandy words with him who knew no reason or mercy?

Oh, if she had but a pistol, or even a knife! How she would fight for her freedom, never so dear to her as at this moment.

He used no violence, but, holding her with a gripe that was painful, he led her forward into the path again.

A pang of hope shot through her frame. Where was Nick? Was it not time for him to return? Would he not be coming along this path in a few minutes? Would they not meet, and then she would be safe after all?

But no one else was encountered, nor did she hear any indication of the proximity of her friends.

"Why do they remain away? Have they, too, deserted me?" she wailed, in her anguish. "Is there no hope for me?"

The heavens seemed closed, indeed. As the dim

moonlight fell upon her captor, she glanced askance at him. In the obscurity he seemed ten times more hideous and repulsive than ever before.

She did not dare to struggle or resist him. She knew what a fearful temper he possessed, and she wondered at his forbearance, in the face of the struggle she had already made, to flee from him.

Perhaps the exultation he felt in her recapture compensated him for all the labor he had undergone in the pursuit.

Whither would he take her? Back to the camp, where his companions were awaiting his return?

She had scarcely asked herself this question, when he left the path, taking the side opposite to the one by which they had entered it, and at that moment utter, hopeless, dead despair took possession of her.

Why struggle against fate? She was doomed to fall into his hands; the fond dreams that had cheered her for years were not to be realized; hope was all a mockery; there was no happiness for her; she was never to see that cherished mother again, nor the face of that father that had vanished as suddenly as he appeared before her.

"Lead on, Red Bear," she murmured, hardly knowing what she said.

The triumphant young chief needed no such admonition, for he strode through the wood so rapidly, dragging her after him, that she could scarcely keep her feet.

She had no knowledge or thought of the direction she was pursuing, for it was nothing to her, and she did not seek to know. She only knew that she was the most wretched and suffering of mortals, and that the future was all a blank to her. The bright sky overhead held no moon or stars for her.

On, still on he led, his grasp never relaxing, and stumbling forward, as though held in the power of some horrid nightmare.

When it seemed to her that she had been dragged forward for a mile (although it was less than one eighth of that distance), she saw that they were nearing a camp-fire. She concluded at once that it was the main one, around which most of the party were gathered, but was somewhat surprised upon reaching it that no one else was near. They were still as much alone as though buried in the very depth of the forest.

Still the camp had been recently visited, for the fire was burning so brightly as to prove that it must have been replenished but a short time before. There was a heap of brush and fuel lying near, and gathering up an armful, Red Bear cast it upon the flames.

As they flared up they made the immediate circle in which they were standing as light as day.

Perhaps, in her distress, Miona's remarkable beauty was increased, for when the young chief turned his dark eyes upon her, there was no anger and nothing but love in his expression, and with something like sadness in his voice, he asked:

"Why did the Queen of the Woods fly from me?"

"She wished to go to her own home and kindred."

"Her home is with the Blackfeet, and none of her kindred can love her as they do."

"But Miona is white and they are red; they are of different races and cannot consort together."

"Love knows no race nor color," was the rather poetic expression of the dusky lover, who certainly did not intend to be argued out of the position he had assumed.

"Woo-wol-na promised that when five summers had come and gone, I should be sent to my people. Has Woo-wol-na two tongues?"

"Red Bear made no such promise," was the sullen reply of the Blackfoot. "It is Red Bear that claims the Queen."

"But he does the Queen a great wrong; she has spent many years with the Blackfeet; they have treated her kindly, and she loves them; but her heart is with her father and mother, who are waiting for her coming."

"Let them come to the Queen," replied the warrior; "they shall be given the chief's lodge, they shall sleep upon the finest furs, and shall eat the fattest buffalo; they shall be welcome for all the moons they wish to stay, because they are the friends of the Blackfoot Queen."

Miona had no hope or thought of gaining a concession from her captor, but she was seeking merely to gain time. There was a faint stir of hope again when she found no other Indians near the fire. Surely Nick Whiffles and her lover must speedily miss her and institute a search, and she believed the sagacity of the trapper ought to be sufficient to direct him to the right spot.

The absence of the Blackfeet was inexplicable as that of her friends. She knew that the wood was swarming with the dusky foes, and how it was that they still remained away was certainly singular, to say the least.

She was not aware that this was only one of a number of fires, kindled here and there in the valley for the purpose of distracting the fugitives and preventing their escape over the ridge.

Red Bear showed the same deference toward her that had characterized him during the years past. He evidently regretted the outbreak of which he had been guilty at the deserted village, and which he was certain had hastened the flight of the girl, and caused the aversion with which she seemed to regard him.

Having recovered possession of her again, he was now anxious to undo this mischief and to restore himself to his original place in her esteem.

Both were standing near the fire; he had his arms folded, in the stoical indifferent manner of the Indian warrior while his swarthy face, and his dark eyes that scarcely ever wandered from hers, were lit up with an expression of undisguised admiration and love.

Surely no Indian had ever coveted maid as he coveted her; surely never had the earth seen such a flower bloom as she at his side; surely she was worth any sacrifice or danger that he could offer.

Miona stood with her blanket gathered about her, her long, dark, Indian-like tresses hanging over her shoulders, her face downcast, as she looked gloomily into the fire, answering his questions and making her remarks with the dreamy indifference of one who is unconscious of what she is saying.

"When will Red Bear take the Queen of the Woods back to his village?"

"Now," was the instant reply of the Indian, his eyes flashing up at the thought of her concession.

"But the way is long and Miona is weary."

"She can sleep in the canoe of Red Bear; he will spread his blanket for her, and while he paddles, she can sleep."

"The way is long to the water where his canoe is lying; she would rest here until daylight comes, and then go with him."

The black eyes of the Indian flashed, for he understood on the instant what the request meant. She wished to tarry here by the camp-fire until her friends could come to her rescue again.

He glanced furtively about in the gloom, to make sure that no form was stealing upon him, and then, stepping close to the girl, asked, in a hurried undertone:

"Does the Queen look for the coming of her friends? She may turn her eyes away, for they will never come again."

"What!" gasped Miona; "are they dead?"

"They sleep in the ground," replied Red Bear, intending to give poetical phase to the deliberate falsehood he was telling.

"Oh! how can I bear this?" wailed the poor stricken captive, pressing her hands to her forehead, as if to keep her head from bursting.

She believed the monstrous deception, for it accounted for the continued absence of her friends. She was certain no other cause could explain their failure to return to her.

Very naturally, when she awoke in the wood, it seemed to her that she had been sleeping for a much longer time than was really the case. She was confident that three or fours hours had passed since she closed her eyes in slumber, and while she sat unconscious on the ground the two men who had risked all for her had met their doom.

Red Bear saw that his deceit had done its work, and with a sort of chivalry difficult to understand, he maintained a respectful silence until she could recover, in a measure, from this great woe that had come upon her.

There were no tears and no more lamentations upon the part of Miona. A sort of dull stupor appeared to possess her. There was one sharp, agonizing pang when the Blackfoot pronounced the terrible words, and then the same stolid despair came back to her. The bright flower of hope that she had cherished was withered and dead, and no tidings could deepen her miserable condition.

Some five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and still the two figures stood silent and motionless by the lonely camp-fire. Miona was in that dull, unnatural state, hardly conscious of where she was, while her companion was all alert, constantly turning his head and looking about him, as though he was not entirely free from personal fear.

"Will the Queen go with Red Bear?" finally ventured the Indian, in the hope of breaking the oppressive spell that was resting upon her.

"Not yet—not yet," she answered, waving her head sadly from side to side. She was pale, but calm, and turning her face upon him, she asked in a voice which, while it sounded like that of another person, was still without the least trace of emotion.

"Where are all the warriors of Red Bear?"

He pointed to the south.

"Yonder is kindled the camp-fire of the Blackfeet, and there the warriors are gathered."

"Are they all there?"

"There are some hunting through the wood for the pale faces."

Again was there a painful flicker of hope in the heart of Miona, and she asked, with an eager quickness:

"Why do you hunt for the pale-faces if they are dead?"

The question was so quick and unexpected that the wily red-skin was nonplussed for the moment. He recovered quickly, and answered:

"All do not know it; those who have not heard of it, are still searching the woods for them."

Ah! that one single second of hesitation undid Miona; she knew Red Bear had told a falsehood, and her friends were still living.

Still Miona, as far as possible, concealed her discovery from her captor. She was resolved to delay their going by every means in her power; so she resorted to several trivial questions, finally asking:

"Do we return alone, or with the warriors of Woo-wol-na?"

"We shall go back together—sh!" he added, turning his head as quick as lightning.

As he did so, the figure of Ned Mackintosh came out of the gloom, and stood before him with his revolver in hand.

"Attempt to raise your gun and you're a dead dog!" muttered the young scout, raising his hand. "If he don't understand that, Miona, please translate it for me."

Whether he understood it or not, cannot be said, but forgetting all in the one thought of self-preservation, he whirled on his feet to flee, when he found himself face to face with Nick Whiffles.

"Hold on a minute, Red Bear," said the trapper, "there's a condemned little difficulty between us that had better be settled now!"

CHAPTER XVII.

OVER THERE.

"CALAMITY," said Nick Whiffles, addressing his dog, "jest keep watch, and ef you smell any of the varmints comin', let us know in time to slope."

Thus assured that there was no danger of surprise, the trapper gave his attention to the case before him.

Red Bear was standing with his arms folded, his gun leaning against the nearest tree, fairly cornered, but still defiant and ready to die the death he was certain was only delayed for a few minutes. Ned Mackintosh held his pistol so as to cover the red-skin, and to anticipate any movement he might make.

Nick stood silent a moment, and then turning to Mackintosh, said, in a low, rapid voice:

"I have told you what to do lad; take the gal and do it."

The young man motioned to the girl to approach, and with one bound she sprang across the intervening space. Taking her by the arm, the two turned their backs upon the motionless figures, and at a rapid walk disappeared in the wood.

"Red Bear," said Nick, "I want you to stop chasing that gal; she don't belong to you, and I'll be damned if you shall foller her."

He made no reply—sullen, stoical, and defiant as ever, and Nick began to lose patience.

"I've got ye in my power, and it wouldn't take much for me to send you under and raise your ha'r, but I don't want to do it, on account of your father, fur me and him went on the war-path together afore you were born, and we allers took a sort of hankerin' fur each other."

Red Bear now raised his gaze and showed by his manner that he felt some interest in what was said.

"Sarcumstances have made me run summat ag'in' Woo-wol-na durin' the last few years, and I don't suppose he'll look over the part I've played; but it's all the same to me whether he does or don't. We've had a purty hard job of it, Red Bear, to keep out of your way, and you come mighty near gettin' ahead of us, but I think we've sarcumented you at last. Don't you think so?"

The Indian answered by darting a quick glance around in the woods, the meaning of which was apparent to the trapper.

"You needn't expect that any of them are goin' to help you. My pup is on the watch, and he'll let me known soon enough to keep out of the way of the Blackfeet."

It may be said here that it was through the assistance of Calamity that Nick and Ned had finally discovered Miona. First making sure of her rescue, they then hastily agreed upon their plan of action.

The trapper directed that they should approach simultaneously from opposite directions, and Ned should take the girl in charge and start in as direct a line as possible for the northern ridge, passing over that until he reached the stream upon the opposite side, where he was to await the coming of Whiffles. The latter with the assistance of his dog, had no doubt but that he could easily discover them. His great purpose was to get them out of this dangerous valley as speedily as possible, and at the same time place them beyond any likelihood of being overtaken by the Indians, who, as a matter of course, would not relinquish the hunt so long as there was any prospect of success.

Nine mountaineers out of ten would have put Red Bear to death the instant they gained the opportunity; but Nick Whiffles, although of a terrible nature when aroused, was not vindictive. To him the crime would have been nothing but murder, and he had no thought of injuring any one except in case of inevitable necessity.

His object now was to gain time; he wished to give the lovers all the start possible, and for that reason he was remaining by the camp-fire to prevent Red Bear dashing away for assistance, or calling his comrades to his aid.

In doing this, it will be seen that Nick incurred great personal risk, which, however, was characteristic of him. Despite the vigilance of Calamity, some treacherous red-skin might steal near enough to give a fatal shot. In the gloomy depths of the woods lurked the most daring of red-skins who were willing to risk their lives at any time for the sake of their leader, or that they might secure revenge upon a race for whom they entertained a hereditary hatred.

All this, as I have said, Nick Whiffles understood perfectly, but it produced no drawing back or hesitation in the part he had marked out for himself.

The position taken by the trapper was such that it placed him as near the rifle of Red Bear as was the latter. This, although apparently done by accident, was for the purpose of preventing the Indian taking any sudden advantage of the weapon. At the same time Nick kept his eye upon him, ready to detect and frustrate any movement looking toward him.

As their relative positions were a little embarrassing, Nick naturally indulged his habit of talking when an opportunity occurred.

"The gal made a regular bargain with you, Red Bear, or with Woo-wol-na, which is the same thing, that when five years come round she should have the right to go or stay, and why, in thunder, don't you stick to your bargain?"

"Red Bear loves the Queen of the Woods," replied the warrior.

"Wal, I don't s'pose she can help that, and so you shouldn't blame her fur that; but you don't love her half as much as that young chap that's walked off wth her."

This, of course, was uttered in the Blackfoot tongue, and the Indian comprehended it. It was touching him in his tenderest spot, and his black eyes gleamed with an evil light as he turned upon the trapper.

The fire of jealousy was burning in his dark nature, and some threat was struggling to his tongue; but he repressed it, and the words he would have spoken were not uttered, and he looked down in the fire before him.

"Speak, Red Bear, if you have anything to say," said Nick, who understood the movement, and wished to encourage him.

But the Indian maintained silence.

"You needn't get ready to sing your death-song, 'cause I ain't going to hurt you, that is as long as you behave yourself—mighty! no—what would I want to hurt a poor red scamp like you for?"

"The words of my brother are the words of a coward," replied Red Bear, turning defiantly upon him. "Let him lay down his gun and meet me with his knife."

"Nobody is afraid of ye, Red Bear," replied Nick, not disconcerted in the least. "I've raised the ha'r of bigger Injuns than you, but what's the use? I won't feel any better for wipin' you out, and you hain't got any chance to wipe me out."

At this juncture Calamity bounded into view, and his appearance meant that danger threatened, that it was time for him to be on the move.

Stooping down, Nick caught up the rifle of the Indian, and said:

"I'll leave it out here, where you can find it at daylight ag'in; but you see I don't care 'bout gettin' hit in the back. Good-by, Red Bear."

As he was passing out of the circle of light on the other side of the clearing, the trapper looked back, and saw the infuriated Blackfoot with his tomahawk raised over his head. The next instant it had left his hand. As Nick sprung to one side it whizzed past him, almost grazing his shoulder.

At the same moment Red Bear gave utterance to a whoop, intended to draw his warriors about him, and Nick concluded it was time for him to make tracks; and so he did, plunging into the woods and running with the speed of a deer.

Ned Mackintosh was prudent enough, when he left the camp with Miona, to take a very different direction from that which led toward his destination. When assured that he was beyond sight he turned off sharply to the right and made all haste toward the ridges which for so long a time seemed to have shut them in.

Whiffles was confident that they had traveled a goodly distance by this time, for both of them were too wise to permit any thing—not absolutely beyond their control—to prevent their making all haste out of what they might properly view as a literal Valley of Death.

So the trapper did not bother to look to the right or left, but kept straight on toward the mountain, intent only upon reaching it as close in the rear of his friends as possible.

He knew the Blackfeet were swarming through the valley, searching up and down in every direction for their prey, and, as he had remarked to his friends, this persistent pursuit would be kept up so long as there was the least prospect of success.

The ground was very rough and uneven, and the wood became more open as he advanced; but he and his dog bounded forward like a couple of chamoises, scarcely heeding the obstructions any more than those animals.

Once over the ridge and into the stream that flowed northward, with his faithful paddle in hand, he would fear no pursuit from his foes. A day or two would carry him beyond the Blackfoot country, into a territory where they would be sure of meeting friends and where all danger of Miona's recapture would be ended.

Filled with these cheering thoughts, Nick pressed forward and soon found himself ascending the slope toward which his eyes had been turned so longingly for a day or two past.

"On, up he climbed, until at last he reached the culminating point. Here in the pale moonlight he cast his eyes anxiously down the other slope. He could just discern the course of the stream, along whose banks, somewhere near at hand, lay the canoe, which he had used several months before in making the same journey.

The descent upon the other side was much more abrupt, and in a short time Nick Whiffles was at the bottom. Then a few hundred yards further he stood upon the bank of the stream.

Just then a footstep struck his ear, and turning his head, Ned Mackintosh stood before him. Nick impulsively caught his hand.

"Where's the gal?"

"She's all right," laughed Ned, at his eagerness, and while he spoke Miona came smilingly forward and joined them.

"Didn't you have any trouble?"

"None at all," replied Ned. "As soon as we got fairly away from the camp-fire, we struck a bee-line for the ridge, and never stopped till we reached this point, where we waited your coming. We haven't seen an Indian on the way, and count ourselves very fortunate."

"You are indeed, by mighty if you ain't."

"Are we not out of all danger?" asked Miona, with a glowing face.

"We ain't yet, but soon will be, if good luck follows us. These varmints ain't goin' to let us alone. That canoe of mine ain't fur off."

The search was begun, and in a few minutes ended

in discovering the little boat stowed away under a clump of heavy bushes. It was placed in the water, and the three took their seats just as the ears of all heard the same ominous, dreaded tremolo whistle of the Blackfeet startlingly near them.

Nick muttered an expression of impatience.
"There the varmints are ag'in, by mighty!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

JOURNEYING TO THE HAPPY LAND.

The fugitives, including Calamity, were seated in the canoe, and Nick Whiffles was holding the paddle in his hand, when the well-known whistle of the Blackfeet was heard. The worst of it was that it sounded down-stream, so that it looked as if they would be compelled to run a gauntlet.

Dipping the paddle softly into the stream, he began cautiously moving with the current, listening and watching, while Calamity, in the prow of the canoe, with his paws resting upon the gunwale in his old-fashioned manner, was all vigilance and watchfulness.

All the wonderful skill of Whiffles and his dog was now called into exercise and he warned the lovers not to attempt to move or speak even in a whisper.

The moon, faint though it was, was against them, for the owl-eyes of the red-skins would be on the alert, and a little inadvertency at such a time would prove fatal. Nick kept as close under shore as possible, and moving with a tardiness that at times made his progress less than that of the current itself.

Something less than a quarter of a mile was passed in this manner, when the same whistle reached their ears again. This time it came from a point directly below them, and was instantly answered from a point above.

At the same moment, Calamity gave utterance to his warning whine. At that time they were in the shadow of the shore, and close to a sort of tiny bay, about a rod in depth. Into this Nick instantly sent the canoe, for the time had come when a halt was necessary.

Nick was quite confident that the canoe was not seen by the Blackfeet as yet. Red Bear had been wise enough to know the point aimed at by the fugitives, and upon being freed from his durance at the camp-fire, had summoned his warriors and started upon a fierce and immediate pursuit.

In the deep shadows of the cove, overhung by dense shrubbery, the darkness was impenetrable. The occupants of the canoe could look out on the creek and see the surface of the water reflecting the pale moonlight, but when they withdrew their gaze they could not see each other's faces.

Scarcely five minutes had passed when the soft rustling of a stealthily-moving Indian was heard. It was a familiar sound to Nick; he had heard it many a time in years past, and he could not be deceived. The trapper knew, from the peculiar sound, that the red-skin had parted the bushes within six feet of the canoe, and was peering into the gloom in search of them.

It was a trying ordeal, where men, woman and dog knew that their lives depended on absolute, utter silence, but all stood it well. Like so many statues, carved in stone, they sat, motionless, speechless, and almost breathless.

For two minutes the Blackfoot waited and listened, and then withdrew, and in the same stealthy, cat-like manner continued his search along the banks above them.

The Indian had not been gone long enough for the whites to attempt to breathe freely, when a second enemy put in an appearance.

A slight rippling of the water, caused all to turn their gaze toward the creek; they saw a dark, round body floating upon the surface, which they instantly recognized as the head of an Indian, who was swimming in the deep water.

Nick Whiffles, with the instinctive sagacity that distinguished him, made up his mind that discovery was inevitable, and he grasped the buck-horn handle of his knife to make sure it was ready.

Swimming against the current, the savage moved very slowly, so as to make his search as thorough as possible, and doubtless his black eyes were scrutinizing the dark shore, on the alert for the first indication of the hiding-place of his victims.

Curiously enough, the Indian swam on by the cove, and had nearly passed out of the range of vision, when he seemed suddenly to discover his oversight, and turning back, swam directly into the opening.

The water was so deep that he continued swimming even when abreast of the canoe, and within an arm's length of the shore. He was groping about with his hand, to make certain of not missing anything within, and began at the upper side of the half-circle, made by the indentations, and proceeded to make the circuit of the cove.

Such a search could not fail to be effectual, and as he came around where the boat lay, his hand touched the gunwale, and he slid it rapidly along, with the instant conviction that he had discovered his prey.

"Hooh!" he exclaimed, as he reached his arm further over.

But, just then, something was placed upon his shoulder which quietly but powerfully forced him under the surface of the water and held him there.

It was the iron grip of Nick Whiffles that forced him under, and against which he was powerless to resist.

The Indian struggled fiercely, and in doing so, Nick felt an ornament around his neck.

It was an ornament so peculiar in its construction, that he recognized the wearer at once as Red Bear.

A thrill of amazement ran through the hunter at the discovery, for it seemed as if the young chief was doomed to haunt them.

"Lean t'other way, quick, or the boat will upset," said Nick, as he braced himself in the canoe.

His command was obeyed, and calling into play his immense strength, he drew the limp, almost lifeless body into the boat, depositing it at his own feet. There was a gasp, and a struggle, and, as Red Bear gained command of himself, Nick spoke hurriedly in the Blackfoot tongue:

"Don't stir or speak, or I'll drive my knife through you."

The Indian did not move, and but for his hurried breathing the lovers would have believed he was dead.

Ned Mackintosh felt that it was misplaced mercy to spare this treacherous red-skin, and he was impatient that Nick should have drawn him into the boat out of danger; but there was no gainsaying the trapper, who certainly was entitled to have his way.

For half an hour they remained in this cove, at the end of which time Nick felt satisfied that the Blackfeet were all up the stream out of their way, and consequently the coast was clear.

Once more he dipped his paddle beneath the surface, and began cautiously floating down the current, still keeping close to the bank, and moving with the same care that had distinguished his actions from the first.

Red Bear lay motionless in the bottom of the canoe. Faster and faster rowed the boat, until gradually it neared the center of the stream, where advantage could be taken of the current.

The hours of darkness were improved, and the toughened old trapper plied his oar with ceaseless energy.

The night wore on, and mile after mile was placed behind them. When the gray light of morning broke over wood and stream, all were asleep excepting Nick Whiffles.

When the forenoon was well advanced the creek was found to open into the south branch of the Saskatchewan.

Here, for the first time, Nick turned the boat ashore, touching the beach very lightly, but with sufficient force to awaken Red Bear, who came to the upright position and looked wonderingly about him.

"Red Bear," said Nick, "this is the second time you've been in my power since yesterday's sun went down. Just as you was drownin' I found it was you; I hauled you out, and saved you. You are in my power now, and, though I say it myself, there ain't many that would be as merciful to you as I am. But, you're an Injin and I'm a white man, and your ways and mine ain't the same. I've took your weapons away from you, 'cause I can't trust you; and I've carried you so far away from your warriors that there ain't any more reason to fear 'em. You can now step ashore and go back to your village, with the good-by of Miona, Mackintosh, and Nick Whiffles."

The Indian stepped sullenly out, and as his feet touched the ground again, he looked back for a moment, and then turning about, vanished in the wood.

The next instant the canoe was under way down the South Branch. When the lovers opened their eyes and saw him gone, the trapper told them that he had left, and there was no more need of thinking further of him.

Near noon the entire party landed, and a fire was kindled, while Nick and Calamity went in search of game. It was easily procured, and he prepared one of the best meals that they had ever eaten. Then they had a long rest, after which they re-entered their canoe and continued their leisurely way down the South Branch until night closed about them. A camp was made, and with Calamity as their sentinel, the entire party secured a long night of slumber and freedom from fear.

The river was followed until its most northern point was reached, when the canoe was left on the beach, and they made the journey on foot across the country to the Churchill river, where they procured a canoe from the Indians, and when they disembarked again, it was at their destination, Fort Churchill.

Here Miona joined her mother and father, whose joy at the restoration of their long-lost daughter I leave to the imagination of my readers.

Nick Whiffles was looked upon as the hero he really was. He at first refused the rewards that were pressed upon him, but, more to gratify the donors than himself, he accepted a couple of splendid rifles, two magnificent silver-mounted revolvers, and a number of knives. Besides this, Ned succeeded in inducing him to take a package, with the promise not to open it until after their departure. In this parcel was a photograph of the gyer, and underneath it a roll of bills amounting to two hundred pounds.

Nick remained at the fort several days, but finally bade all farewell and started southward on his return with Calamity, to join Shagbark, and to resume his wild, lonely life in the solitudes of North America.

A week later, the homeward-bound vessel "Victoria" sailed up through Hudson's Bay, and through the straits, into the stormy Atlantic, and on across the ocean toward London. Among her passengers were Bandiman and his wife and daughter—the child of the woods—the betrothed of Ned Mackintosh, who, the happiest of the happy, was one of that vessel's precious company in its homeward flight over the sea.

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